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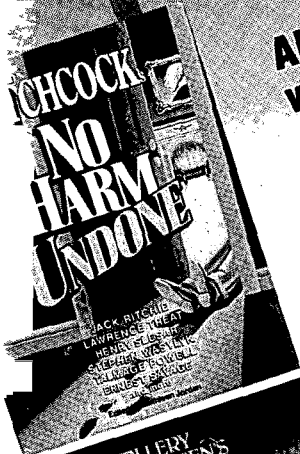
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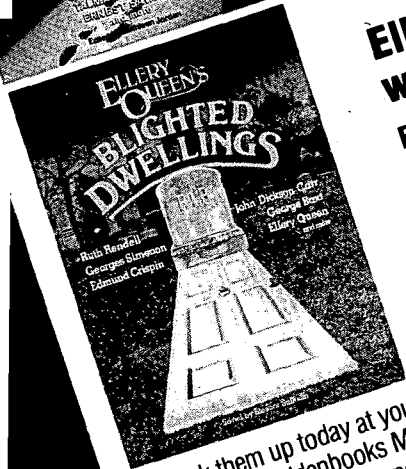


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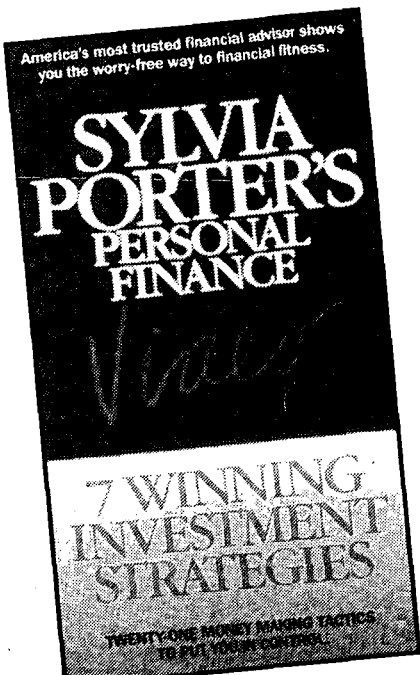
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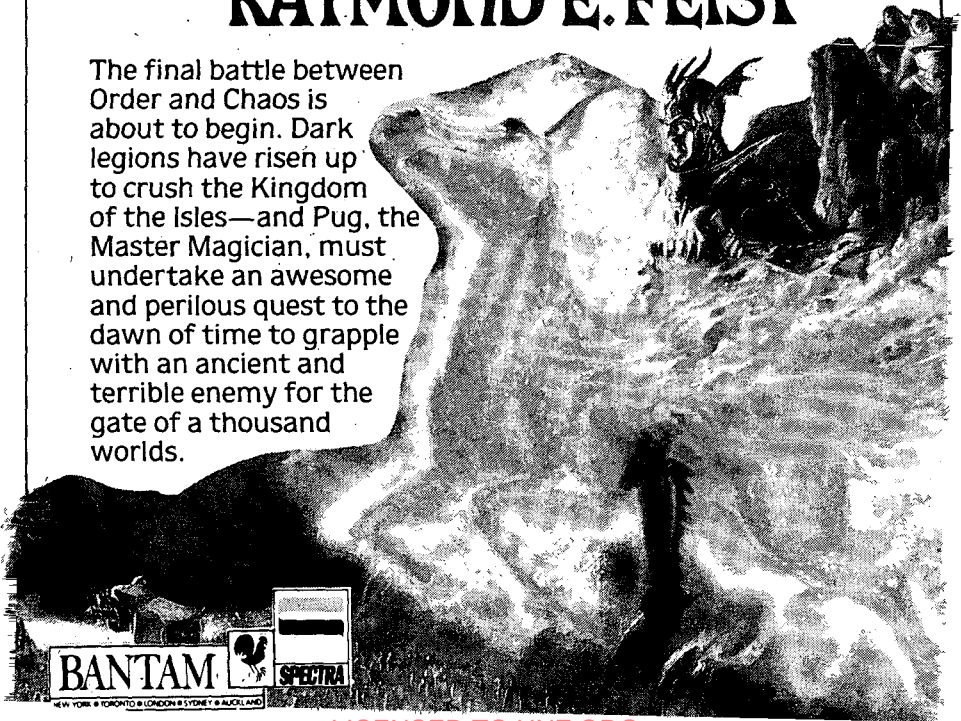
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

A recently published anthology, *Death Locked In: An Anthology of Locked Room Stories*, brought to our attention this issue's Mystery Classic. Two classics, actually, but they go together. The first is a tale of supernatural goings-on by May Futrelle, wife of Jacques Futrelle, who created the well-known fictional detective, the Thinking Machine, around the turn of the century. The second story, by Jacques Futrelle, is a continuation of the first, in which the supernatural events are shown to be capable of logical explanation. The stories were written in 1907.

These are fun, we think, and we're indebted to Douglas G. Greene and Robert C. S. Adey, editors of *Death Locked In*, for including them. (See Mary Cannon's column, *Booked & Printed*, in this issue for further information about their collection.)

We're most pleased to be able to announce that, for the fourth year in succession, a story first published in AHMM has won the Robert L. Fish Award

for Best First Mystery Short Story. It is "Roger, Mr. Whilkie!" by Eric M. Heideman, published in our July 1987 issue. Our congratulations to him.

We're also delighted that two other nominees for the Fish Award came from AHMM's pages: "Looking Back" by Theodore H. Hoffman (April 1987) and "Crossfire" by Charles F. Williams (June 1987). The remaining nominees were "Access Violation" by Roger Gallagher and "I Could Never Say No to Lloyd" by Leslie Meier, both from EQMM.

The Fish Award is always presented in May, the day after the annual banquet at which the Edgars are announced. What follows is the list of Edgar winners and nominees in all categories, with the winners in bold face type.

BEST NOVEL OF 1987:

Old Bones by Aaron Elkins
(Mysterious Press)

A Trouble of Fools by Linda Barnes (St. Martin's)

Nursery Crimes by B. M. Gill
(Scribners)

Rough Cider by Peter Lovesey
(Mysterious Press)

The Corpse in Oozak's Pond by Charlotte MacLeod (Mysterious Press)

"The Au Pair Girl" by Joyce Harrington (*A Matter of Crime*, No. 1, HBJ)

BEST FIRST MYSTERY NOVEL OF 1987:

Death Among Strangers by Deidre S. Laiken (Macmillan)

Detective by Parnell Hall (Donald I. Fine)

Heat Lightning by John Langtigua (Putnam)

Lover Man by Dallas Murphy (Scribners)

The Spoiler by Domenic Stansberry (Atlantic Monthly)

BEST JUVENILE NOVEL OF 1987:

Lucy Forever and Miss Rosetree, Shrinks by Susan Shreve (Henry Holt)

Bury the Dead by Peter Carter (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

The Twisted Window by Lois Duncan (Delacorte)

The House on the Hill by Eileen Dunlop (Holiday House)

Through the Hidden Door by Rosemary Wells (Dial)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL NOVEL OF 1987:

Bimbos of the Death Sun by Sharyn McCrumb (TSR, Inc.)

The Monkey's Raincoat by Robert Crais (Bantam)

Deadly Intrusion by Walter Dillon (Bantam)

The Long Way to Die by James N. Frey (Bantam)

Bullshot by Gabrielle Kraft (Pocket)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1987:

CBS Murders by Richard Hammer (Morrow)

The Man Who Robbed the Pierre by Ira Berkow (Atheneum)

Dreams of Ada by Robert Mayer (Viking)

Engaged to Murder by Loretta Schwartz-Nobel (Viking)

Talked to Death by Stephen Singular (Beechtree Books, Morrow)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1987:

"Soft Monkey" by Harlan Ellison (Mystery Scene Reader, Fedora, Inc.)

"Breakfast Television" by Robert Barnard (EQMM, January 1987)

"Stroke of Genius" by George Baxt (EQMM, June 1987)

"Mr. Felix" by Paula Gosling (EQMM, July 1987)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK OF 1987:

An Introduction to the Detective Story by Leroy Lad Panek (Popular Press)

Crime & Mystery, the 100 Best Books by H. R. F. Keating (Carroll & Graf)

Campion's Career: A Study of the Novels of Margery Allingham by B. A. Pike (Popular Press)

Corridors of Deceit, the World of John le Carre by Peter Wolfe (Popular Press)

BEST MOTION PICTURE SCREENPLAY OF 1987:

Stakeout, screenplay by Jim Kouf (Buena Vista)

Best Seller, screenplay by Larry Cohen (Orion)

Robocop, written by Edward Neumeir and Michael Miner (John Davison Production Co.)

The Big Easy, written by Daniel Petrie, Jr. (independently produced; distributed by Columbia)

The Stepfather, screenplay by Donald E. Westlake, story by Carolyn LeCourt, Brian Garfield, and Donald E. Westlake (ITC Productions)

BEST TELEFEATURE OF 1987:

Nutcracker: Money, Murder and Madness, written by William Hanley (NBC)

Deadly Deception, written by Gordon Cotler (CBS)

Old Dogs, written by Michele Gallery (ABC)

The Hands of the Stranger,

written by Arthur Kopit (NBC)

BEST SEGMENT IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1987:

"The Musgrave Ritual" from "The Return of Sherlock Holmes," Mystery!, dramatized by Jeremy Paul (PBS)

"The Right to Remain Silent," *Cagney and Lacey*, teleplay by David Abramowitz, story by Becky Cole and David Abramowitz (CBS)

"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," *Wiseguy*, written by Eric Blakeney (CBS)

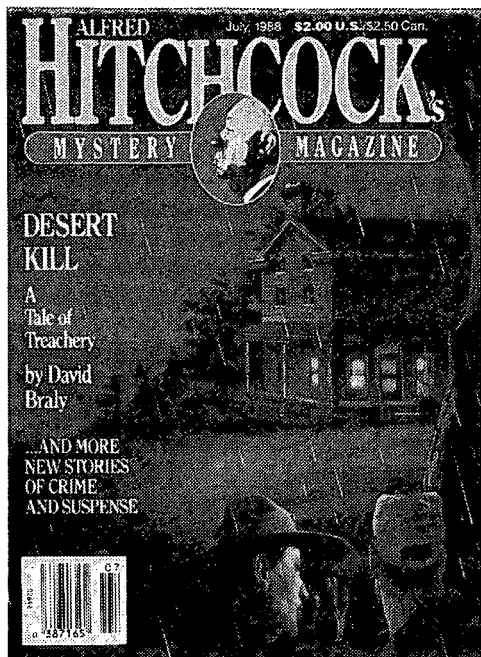
"Blue Movie," *Private Eye*, written by Ron Hansen (NBC)

"Nicky the Rose," *Private Eye*, teleplay by John Leekley and Alfonse Ruggiero, Jr., story by Anthony Yerkovich and John Leekley (NBC)

Special Raven Awards were voted this year for Vincent Price and Angela Lansbury for their "years of distinguished contributions to the mystery genre." The Ellery Queen Award went to Ruth Cavin; the Grand Master was Phyllis Whitney.

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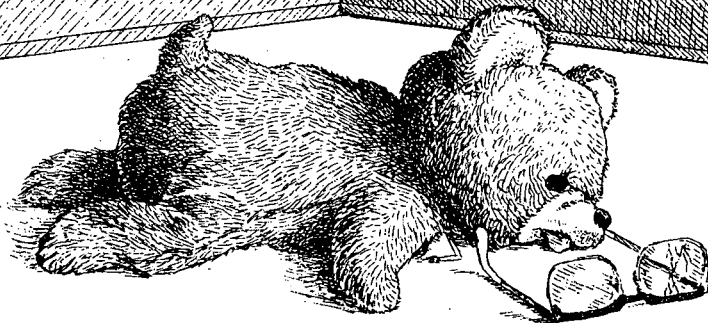
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The Teddy Bears' Wake



by Catherine L. Stanton

BOWDREN

“**R**un that by me again,” said St. Clair Backhouse Bellamy, known to his friends as Sam. “Someone killed her for her teddy bear?”

“Not just *any* teddy bear,” the woman from the next motel room corrected him. She was as round-faced and round-eyed as

a teddy bear herself, and Sam had been regretting the way she and her husband had cornered him by the motel pool until the conversation had taken this turn. “It was Marilyn Monroe’s teddy bear. The poor thing!”

She addressed herself to her second gin and tonic, leaving it unclear whether she felt sorry

for the bear or for its late owner. She didn't usually drink more than one, she'd told Sam twice (once per drink), but then murders didn't usually happen at teddy bear festivals, and she was feeling the need of bracing up.

Sam took a swallow of his beer and asked himself whether he really felt like pursuing this. He hadn't come to Amherst for the teddy bear festival, or for anything even remotely like fun. He'd come because his Great-Uncle Edward had died and left him with a hell of a mess. He'd come to have a look at Clairmont, his uncle's estate, and to try to decide whether he wanted to scrap his several more-or-less successful careers in order to take over that thirty-four room white elephant. It was something that was taking a lot of thought.

Sam had spent all afternoon with Uncle Edward's lawyers, and had come back to his motel room to think. His thoughts hadn't fit in the pokey room, so he'd taken a beer to the side of the pool to contemplate the unnaturally blue water and wonder whether he wanted to spend the rest of his young life paying taxes on a building he couldn't possibly afford to maintain. Sam had no idea why Uncle Edward had left him Clairmont in his will. He'd always thought the

old boy had liked him, but perhaps he'd been mistaken.

The arrival of Lily and George Cardinal by the motel pool had put an end to quiet contemplation. Lily, particularly, seemed likely to implode if she didn't tell someone their news, and Sam was elected to listen, by reason of proximity. The wall between their rooms was, after all, so thin as to have made them practically acquaintances already.

Sam had listened first with impatience and then with interest to the tale of the teddy bear murder. Since childhood, whenever his mind had recognized a gap in its own knowledge, it turned on a sort of mental vacuum pump that sucked in whatever new information it could find. It was doing that now. In spite of his preoccupation with Uncle Edward's unexpected will, Sam was sucking in information from the Cardinals at a great rate.

Until they'd come along, he hadn't even known that there were such things as teddy bear festivals. He'd assumed everyone had outgrown their teddy bears as he had his (a scholarly-looking bear named "Rex" because what he'd really craved was a dinosaur), but apparently this was not the case. Unbeknownst to St. Clair Backhouse Bellamy, large numbers of

adults spent large amounts of time driving from one bearfest to another, setting up booths and selling the bears and bear-aphernalia they made when they weren't on the road. Thousands of other people came to buy them, and on this particular day in August all of the bear people had converged on Amherst, Massachusetts.

Sam was glad to know that. It cleared up the mystery of why, when he'd arrived at the motel yesterday with his mind full of questions of property tax and death duties, he'd found the parking lot full of fans with bumper stickers that said, "Grin and bear it."

"So you make the bears yourselves?" he asked.

"Lily makes 'em," George said. "I just drive the van."

"He pretends he thinks it's silly," Lily told Sam, "but he loves the bears, too." Sam thought that for someone without apparent acting skills, George was pretending rather well. "We sell a whole family of bears, from the great big one down to the littlest baby."

That was the cue for Sam to be introduced to Buster and Bertha Bear and their progeny, produced like a furry Tupperware set from the Cardinals' motel room. The bears all had endearing personal traits that had to be explained at length,

and it was a while before Sam could steer the conversation back to the question of murder.

Lily Cardinal took up the refrain. "Poor Caroline," she said. She sat down again in a standard-issue poolside chair that didn't seem quite up to her ursine stature. "To think, George, all those years of seeing the Livingstones at shows, and now she's gone. I heard Mary Cole was taken to the hospital for a sedative, she was so upset about it."

Sam was glad to be moving from the general to the specific. He asked who the Livingstones were, and Mary Cole.

"They're like us," said Lily. George snorted. His wife ignored him. "I mean, they travel around to the bear shows. The Livingstones are from Ohio. We've seen them all over the country for years. It's really a little like going from one family reunion to another. After a while you get to think of the other exhibitors as family."

George elaborated on his snort. "I sure as hell never felt like Caroline Livingstone wanted me in her family," he said.

He seemed unacquainted with the principle of saying nothing but good of the dead, but his wife hurried to soften the comment.

"They aren't really our cup of

tea," she said, "but there's nothing *wrong* with them, exactly."

"Cold fish," George summed up bluntly.

Sam pondered the strangeness of a bear person who was a cold fish. "Seems odd," he suggested, "for someone who deals in teddy bears not to be a friendly sort."

Warmed by the implied compliment and cooled by her third gin and tonic, Lily Cardinal came out with the whole story. The Livingstones weren't really *proper* bear people, she said. "That is, they don't *make* the bears. They buy antique bears and sell them for quite a lot of money. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but we do it because we love the bears, and to them it's just a business."

Sam inferred that the Livingstones' business probably showed a higher profit than the Cardinals' labor of love.

"And one of their bears belonged to Marilyn Monroe?" he prompted.

"Their most valuable one," said Lily, and George named a figure that surprised Sam considerably. He'd thought Buster and Bertha were a bit pricey, but a teddy bear worth a small fortune was something he hadn't expected.

"The whole thing is sort of sad," said Lily. "It was the

Coles who found the bear—Mary and Jack Cole. Someone had given it as a gift to Marilyn Monroe, and after she died no one knew where it went. The Coles tracked down the man who had it because they wanted to buy it from him. They're into gimmicky bears, see, and they were going to copy Marilyn's bear and make a lot of them dressed in famous outfits from her movies. And they had the cutest name for it—"

Silently Sam tried to will her not to tell him the cute name.

"—Bearilyn Monroe. Isn't that cute?"

"Cute," Sam said hollowly. He reminded himself that these were responsible adults, who'd been given driver's licenses and home mortgages and everything. He reminded himself, too, of the specialty events he'd attended in his time—camera shows for Leicas only, automobile shows entirely for Corvettes. Why should teddy bears be any different? Still, his faith was shaken.

There was still the murder, though. Someone had taken Bearilyn Monroe seriously enough to kill Caroline Livingstone.

"So the Coles found the bear," he said.

"They did, and the man who owned it decided he should have an open auction and make some

real money out of it. The Coles are so trusting about things, aren't they, George? I'm sure they went and told the man how much the bear was worth, and then he got all greedy about it. Anyway, the bear was auctioned off, and the Livingstones outbid everybody else and bought it."

"Was there a bear show shortly before the auction?" Sam asked.

Lily Cardinal looked puzzled at the non sequitur, but she admitted that there had been a bear festival in California only a couple of weeks before.

"A lot of people thought the Coles deserved to have the bear," she said. "They don't have a lot of money, but they'd done all the work of tracking it down, and the Livingstones just walked away with it because they're rich."

For a moment, the thought of wealth recalled Sam to his Great-Uncle Edward and his own, more pressing problems. But he was beginning to be intrigued by the teddy bears, and besides, something was suggesting itself to him.

"So what happened today?" he asked.

George took up the thread of the story. His narrative style was less embroidered than his wife's, Sam was glad to note.

The Livingstones had brought

Bearilyn Monroe with them to the show, to display, not to sell. They'd entered one of their other bears in the antique bear category of the contest associated with the show, and while Henry Livingstone and most of the crowd were watching the judging, someone had hit Caroline Livingstone from behind so hard it had caved in her skull. She'd been found, after the contest, lying dead on the summer lawn, and Marilyn Monroe's bear was nowhere to be seen.

Sam asked whose booths had been next to the Livingstones'.

"They were at the end of a row, with Mary Cole's booth on one side," George replied, "and the judges' box on the other, but of course that was empty because of the contest going on."

"So Mary Cole was there while someone was killing Mrs. Livingstone?"

"Course not." George seemed almost pleased to have found such an obtuse listener. "She was at the contest, too—she had something entered in the antique category herself. And her husband wasn't with her—he's getting on, and he doesn't come to all the shows any more—so Mary had asked Caroline to keep an eye on her booth while the contest was being judged."

Sam had been pursuing a tidy train of thought which featured the Coles seeking re-

venge for their lost chance at fame and fortune with Marilyn Monroe's bear, and he hated to give it up.

"You're quite sure Mary Cole didn't slip back to her booth during the judging?" he asked.

"The cops thought of that already," George said importantly. "Believe me, they thought of everything they could to try to make it look like Mary stole the bear. If you ask me, they wanted so bad to make her look guilty just because they had no other idea who did it. They couldn't find a single eyewitness, and they looked peeved as hell about it. I heard one cop say he wished they could get Burton to talk. *He* saw the whole thing, whatever happened."

"Burton is the Coles' mascot," Lily explained. "He's this ratty old bear they've been hauling around to shows for donkey's years. He always sits on a chair right in front of their booth."

"Burton's the only witness," George repeated, "and the cops are peeved as hell."

Sam could imagine they might be. The field of suspects would be as boundless as the hundred-odd exhibitors and the thousands upon thousands of visitors. Any one of them might be enough of a bear fanatic to want Marilyn Monroe's personal

teddy bear, he supposed.

"Anyway," Lily put in, "Mary's such a little thing she couldn't have hit Caroline hard enough to kill her. And she just wouldn't. She's so sweet."

"Soft as a grape," was George's estimation, but he agreed with his wife. "They're a nice little old pair, though—always happy to help you out if they can and all that."

"Do they usually come to the shows together?" Sam wanted to know.

"They always used to," said Lily, "but he's getting on, poor dear, and I think the traveling tires him out. The last couple of times she's been on her own. She's younger than he is by a good ten years."

"I'm surprised their booth was right next to the Livingstones," Sam said. "There must have been some hard feelings after the Livingstones bought the bear they wanted."

"Lotta people wondered about that," George said. "But, like I said, they're nice people. I guess Mary decided to forgive and forget." Under the influence of his third beer, he was becoming positively mellow.

"Are the locations for the booths assigned?" Sam asked. "Or do people get to choose their own?"

It varied, they said. At the Amherst teddy bear rally they

seemed to put people in the same locations every year. The Coles and the Livingstones had been side by side last year, and probably Mary Cole had just been too nice to ask to be moved.

Sam finished the last swallow of his beer and looked thoughtfully at the pool, where a couple of small boys were bobbing up and down in front of their father and agitating to go to the beach. Sam wondered if they were bear people. He also wondered whether a short trip to the town center might be in order.

"Is the festival all done?" he asked.

It transpired that George and Lily had skipped out early, partly because Buster and Bertha had exceeded their fondest financial hopes and partly because of the damper put on the whole event by the discovery of Caroline Livingstone's dead body among her antique teddy bears.

"A lot of the booths are still up, though," Lily said. "And they've left the Livingstones' just as it was, of course, because the police have to investigate it." The word "investigate" gave her a little trouble. The gin and tonics seemed to be getting in its way.

Sam thought he'd learned what he could from the Cardinals. He was on the point of get-

ting out of his chair when something else occurred to him.

"What exactly is it about teddy bears?" he asked. "I mean, why do you folks spend so much time on them?"

Lily waved her glass vaguely. "They're the quintessential symbol of childhood," she said. Given her problems with "investigate," Sam thought she was brave to try for "quintessential," but this sounded like a speech she'd given before. "They release the child in all of us."

"Also they sell like a son of a bitch," said her husband.

Sam averaged the two and got his answer.

Sam was glad, in a way, that the teddy bear problem had come along this evening. If St. Clair Backhouse Bellamy had one ruling characteristic, it was that he was incapable of leaving a problem until it was resolved. A camera that didn't work properly would keep him up half the night; news of a friend's divorce would render him irascible for as long as it took to figure out exactly what had gone wrong with the marriage.

He'd spent today striding down the road to a decision about Uncle Edward's estate, but now that the Cardinals had stuck an obstacle in his way, he

knew he wouldn't get back to the business at hand until he'd found out just what had happened in the Livingstones' booth that afternoon. It wasn't just that he welcomed the change from thinking about Uncle Edward. He was physically incapable of leaving the murder alone in this unsolved state. It bothered him quietly but persistently, the way a neighbor mowing the lawn bothers a man trying to doze on a summer afternoon.

In Sam's experience, solving a problem was usually a matter of finding the most obvious solution and pursuing it for as long as possible. Once in a while, when he was really stumped, he would go chasing after esoteric explanations for things, but those were the exceptions. Almost always, the answer that occurred to him first was the one that worked. It was just a matter of finding out *how* it worked.

His theory about the Livingstone murder followed that line of reasoning. He was thinking so hard about it, turning it around in his mind and looking at it, that he'd left himself underprepared for the reality of fifteen thousand teddy bear lovers and an equal or greater number of bears.

Amherst Common is not large, and it seemed even smaller be-

cause of the crowd. Canopied booths filled the park, making the place look more like an upscale refugee camp than a quiet New England college town.

There were bears as far as the eye could see. People carried bears, booths sold them, children pulled red wagons full of them. Sam saw booths selling bear clothes and furniture and little straw hats with ribbons on them. There was a bear hospital under an oak tree where a young woman mended ears and replaced eyes. The food concession was the only thing not bear-related. It sold hot dogs.

Sam passed the judging stand, where the winners of that afternoon's contest were displayed. He stopped to admire the largest bear, happiest bear, best-dressed, farthest-traveled, most unique bears. He noted that the antique teddy bear winner was owned by Caroline and Henry Livingstone of Bowling Green, Ohio.

The late Caroline Livingstone. It was hard to remember, in the midst of all this bear-induced benevolence, that a woman had been killed for the sake of a teddy bear.

It was easy to spot where it had happened. One of the booths was roped off, with an impassive policeman standing guard. Inside, under the bright can-

opy, a man was putting the antique bears into boxes, holding each for a long time first as though he couldn't remember just what he was doing or why. He was perhaps in his sixties, lean and wiry with a good tan, but something about him seemed caved-in and hollow. Sam didn't have to exert himself to figure out that this must be Henry Livingstone.

The booth next to the Livingstones' was also roped off, but it was empty. Next to the Livingstones' rather flossy display, the Coles' bears might have gone unnoticed if it weren't for the oversized specimen sitting on a chair in the foreground.

"You must be Burton," Sam said to the bear. Sam was well over six feet tall, and even sitting down the bear was almost at his eye level. No wonder the Coles' mascot stuck in people's minds. Burton wasn't quite as shoddy as he'd been led to expect—Lily obviously set Florence-Nightingale-like standards for bear hygiene—and his frayed fur had clearly been rehabilitated in the recent past.

Perhaps he'd had his eyes doctored, too, because he wore tiny oval-framed glasses that gave him a curiously knowing air. Sam could understand why the police wished he could talk. It must be annoying as hell to have this almost-sapient being

as the only witness to a murder only a few feet away.

Well, if he wasn't any good to the police, Burton might be of some use to St. Clair Backhouse Bellamy. Sam had always wandered in where even fools feared to tread, and he seized on Burton now as an excuse to approach the bereaved Henry Livingstone.

"Excuse me," he said, leaning over the police rope, "but do you know if this big bear is for sale?"

It took a moment, but Livingstone looked up. There was no real interest in his sharp hazel eyes, but he replied dutifully, "No, I'm afraid not. He's kind of a personal pet of the people who run that booth."

"Shoot." Sam gave a credible imitation of an avid consumer denied the opportunity to consume. "My girlfriend collects bears, and she'd love this one. Maybe I could make a deal with the people who own it. Are they around?"

Henry Livingstone seemed to be battling a great weariness that made it nearly impossible to converse. "She's in the hospital," he said. "She's coming back later tonight to pack up her booth. Don't bother her. She won't sell Burton anyway."

"Well, I just thought it might be worth a try. My girlfriend is really into big bears, you know?

And this one's even bigger than the one that won the contest. I wonder why they didn't enter this guy."

"They're not interested in contests. They've never entered Burton in one. They say he doesn't need ribbons."

Livingstone looked around him at the bears he was packing away. No doubt most of them had won ribbons, and no doubt he was finding that not much of a consolation at the moment.

"Well, thanks anyway," said Sam. Not only was the subject of Burton wearing thin, but Henry Livingstone looked like a man right on the edge of not being able to function at all. Sam left him to his antique teddy bears and wandered through the maze of people and bears until he came to an official-looking booth.

"Excuse me," he said to the woman in charge, "but I'm looking for some people who had a booth here last year. I was sure they told me they were going to be here again, and I really wanted to buy one of their bears."

"What were their names, sir?"

"Cardinal. George and Lily Cardinal. I was sure they said they'd be here."

The woman flipped through a stack of papers on a clipboard, and put an artfully-sculpted

nail on a line. "Here they are," she said. "Booth 28. They were here, but they left early."

If Sam leaned his broad shoulders most of the way into the booth to get a look at the sheet of names and numbers, perhaps it was only because he was so avid to track down his good friends, George and Lily Cardinal. And if the woman seemed not only willing but pleased, perhaps it was just that she had a taste for strapping young men with auburn hair and clear hazel eyes that seemed as incapable of guile as a favorite dog's.

"Have you been here all day?" Sam absently flipped to the next page of the list of exhibitors, as though merely looking for an excuse to prolong the conversation. The Cardinals had signed in at 8:04 A.M., and out again at six P.M. Most people had arrived early, he noted, and Mary Cole had gotten the jump on all of them; next to her name the official checker-in had written, "Was here when I arrived." The Livingstones, on the other hand, had arrived tardily at eight fifty-five.

The woman in the booth had only been there since noon, and she'd been taking a break when the murder had happened, so she didn't have anything to add to that all-absorbing topic. Sam's melting look congealed a bit at

that point, but he added one more comment before wandering off again.

"I noticed that the woman who died had a prize-winner in the contest," he said. "Maybe you should remind her husband not to go off without it—he's packing up and he doesn't look like he's in good enough shape to remember it himself."

"That's very considerate of you, sir. Those people always win in the antique category—they have such a marvelous collection, it's tough to beat them."

"Maybe now the field will open up a little, if the husband doesn't come back next year," Sam suggested.

"Maybe." Before the woman could form a question about whether Sam was planning to be there next year, he had gone.

The woman sighed as she watched him wending his way past a brass band wrestling mightily with a rendition of "The Teddy Bears' Picnic." She belonged to the school of thought which says all attractive men must be either married or gay, and she spent the rest of the evening in happy melancholy, trying to decide which to ascribe to Sam.

Sam made another circuit of the festivities, and came back to stand in front of the Livingstones' booth. Henry Living-

stone was not in evidence, and the policeman obligingly told Sam that the gentleman had gone to get his van.

"Can't wait to get out of here, I'll bet," was the policeman's assessment.

Sam stood for a minute looking at the two empty booths, and finally nodded his head almost imperceptibly, as though his train of thought had just arrived in the station dead on time.

"I get it," he said to himself. "But now what the hell do I do with it?"

What he did was to buy himself a beer and some dinner. If he was right, he had some waiting to do, and he always waited better on a full stomach.

By dusk most of the bearlovers had decamped, and only a few booths were still standing. Their owners were busily packing bears into vans and station wagons and adding up receipts. Apparently the bear market that day had been bullish.

Sam had taken up watch on a bench at one end of the common, where he had a clear view of the remaining booths. He'd tried to turn his mind to thoughts of Clairmont and Uncle Edward, but his mind, while energetic, tended also to be single-track. Instead of mulling

over his own future, he found himself going over and over his theory about the teddy bear murder, inspecting it for flaws. What if he'd missed something? It was nearly nine o'clock, and there was still no sign of the woman he was waiting for.

She turned up at last, driving a pickup truck with Wisconsin plates and a bumper sticker warning other drivers that she braked for teddy bears. The truck seemed too big for her by a couple of sizes, and she had to peer over the windshield as she jockeyed it into position in front of her booth.

She packed up quickly, as though anxious to be gone. She was as small and gentle-looking as Sam had been led to expect, and something about her suggested that this rushing about was foreign to her, and that under other circumstances she would have packed her bears into their boxes as carefully as a connoisseur laying down vintage port. Her motions now were jerky, and in the brightness of the light over her booth, her shadow made darting, uncertain movements. Sam thought she was trying rather too hard not to look around to see if anyone was watching.

Finally the bears were stowed, the canopy folded up, the benches dismantled and loaded into the pickup. There re-

mained only a few odds and ends, and of course the big fellow sitting on his chair, who would certainly be an awkward armful for such a small woman to heft. Sam decided it was time to offer gentlemanly assistance.

Mary Cole was apparently dealing with Burton by wrapping him up in some kind of tarpaulin, and the oversized bear was nearly obscured by the time Sam wandered up.

"Do you need a hand?" he asked, and took one corner of the tarpaulin without waiting to be asked.

"No!" Mary Cole's eyes were the same faded brown as her hair, minus the streaks of gray, and there was real alarm in them at the sight of Sam. "I'm almost done—I don't need any help. I've done this hundreds of times before."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Cole." Sam held onto the canvas more easily than he could hold his gaze on Mary Cole's eyes. "I think he's probably a little heavier today. Isn't that right?"

And then, like a conjuror twitching aside a veil and producing a Brobdingnagian rabbit, Sam pulled away the cloth covering Burton, and they all stood stock-still in the circle of light.

There was no applause. The only sounds were the retreating cars of the last straggling bear

exhibitors, and the raspy breathing of the elderly man who stood next to his wife, half-in and half-out of the big bear's skin, looking from one to the other of them and clutching Marilyn Monroe's teddy bear as desperately as any frightened child.

The sun seemed insultingly cheerful to Sam the next morning, as though it were feeling pleased to be shining down on a world where one small problem, at least, was out of the way.

Sam wasn't nearly that pleased about the whole business. He'd slept sporadically, dreamt fitfully, and by nine o'clock, when the bear people in the motel were starting to emerge to pay their bills and hit the long roads back home, Sam had already been floating in the pool for forty minutes, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

What he'd felt like doing was swimming a mile or two, but he'd estimated that to do that in the dinky motel pool he'd have to do about a zillion laps, so he'd settled for simply floating, with frequent trips to the edge of the pool where his morning coffee was waiting for him. Life was far from perfect, but it was looking a lot better by the time George and Lily

Cardinal arrived to tell him the news he already knew.

"What do you think?" Lily got there first. "They solved Caroline's murder already. I mean, they didn't solve it, he confessed. Can you imagine?"

Sam considered letting himself sink to the bottom until they gave up and went away. But they'd probably just come back with help, and that would be worse. He stood up and hoisted himself onto the edge of the pool.

"That so?" he said. "Who did it?"

"Jack Cole. Mary's husband. Isn't that an amazing thing? But he didn't mean to kill her, just to knock her out and take the bear. He was there the whole time, hiding *inside Burton*. And none of us suspected a thing!"

Maybe *you* didn't, Sam thought, but he didn't say anything. He'd noticed, in the past few years, that people tended to look to him when they wanted problems solved, and that was fine by him. But he was always reticent about taking credit for things, and this time he was positively depressed at the thought of admitting the part he'd played.

"The police had completely given up on the Coles as suspects," Lily went on, "and then last night about ten o'clock Jack

and Mary just walked into the police station and told them the whole story." The words spilling out were making her almost breathless, and her husband took over when she paused for air.

"Been planning it for a year," he said. "Ever since the Livingstones bought that damned bear. Seems the Coles told 'em about it at that festival in California, and the Livingstones called the man who owned the bear and suggested he auction it off, because he'd get a higher price that way."

"Can you imagine? They knew Jack and Mary wouldn't be able to afford it then." Lily settled herself in a chair. "And Jack and Mary said to themselves, 'Fine, if you want to play that way, we can play, too.' And they started thinking how they could get the bear away from them."

"Doesn't seem like it would do them any good, does it?" George said.

"It was *revenge*." The story was evidently taking on the status of legend with Lily already. "They couldn't use the bear, of course, if everyone knew it had been stolen from the Livingstones, but they just wanted to show what happens to people who don't play by the rules."

The Coles had learned that bitterly enough, Sam thought.

He sipped his coffee and let the Cardinals go on.

"So about a year ago, Jack stops going to all the shows and puts out the word he's getting too old for all the traveling." It was George's turn to narrate. Sam wondered if they'd rehearsed this in their room. "So when he didn't show up here, nobody thought there was anything strange about it. And in the meantime, they got busy and opened Burton up and made a hiding place inside him—Jack's just a little guy, see—"

Sam saw. He pictured himself walking up to the big bear yesterday afternoon, looking into those button eyes and half-laughing at the notion of a stuffed animal being the only witness to a murder. And all the time, Jack Cole had been sweltering inside in the close darkness, hearing the furor going on all around and knowing by now that the woman he'd only meant to stun was dead. He'd spent six and a half hellish hours sitting there, he'd told Sam, and far worse than the heat and the claustrophobia had been the desire to burst out and confess what he'd done.

"—and Mary showed up at the common real early, before anyone else, and they got Jack all bundled into Burton and everything looking all normal at the booth."

"I did think," Lily contributed, "that Burton looked a little spiffier than usual, but I just thought they'd been patching him up. He's so big, there was lots of room for Jack and the teddy bear, after he'd taken it."

That had been hideous, too, Jack Cole had said. Forced to cradle in his arms the bear he'd just killed a woman for, he'd listened to the crowds coming back from the judging, the hoarse cry of Henry Livingstone and the shrill hysterical voice of Mary, who'd seen immediately that things had gone very wrong. It had been bad enough while she was there, protesting in her nervous treble that she hadn't been there when it happened, but far worse after they'd taken her to the hospital for a sedative, and he'd had to sit there alone, listening to the sounds of the festival dwindling and wondering whether his wife would come back for him tonight, or whether some stranger would come to discover the secret he'd almost decided to tell.

Sam had solved that problem for him, anyway. Mary Cole had fought to the end, insisting that no one else needed to know, that it had been an accident, that the Livingstones had brought it on themselves, but Jack had smiled sadly at her and said, "I couldn't live with myself, Mary. I'm almost glad

this young man came along. It makes it harder for me to think of backing out."

"I did kind of wonder," George was saying, "about Mary Cole entering something in the antique bear category. I mean, everyone knows the Livingstones always win that, and Jack and Mary's bears are nothing special in the antique line."

"It's so easy to see things in hindsight," his wife sighed. "Of course if they were just interested in winning a ribbon, they could have entered Burton in the largest bear category and won. But it wasn't a ribbon they were after—it was just a way to give Mary an alibi for the crime."

She used the words "alibi" and "crime" importantly, and Sam felt a sudden spasm of irritation with her. If she'd been this clever about things yesterday, *she* could have had the honor of uncovering Jack and Mary's secret, and saved Sam the unpleasantness of being the one to point the finger at two nice elderly people who'd just messed up what was left of their lives with a ridiculous plan to salve their wounded pride.

"What will they do to the Coles?" he asked abruptly.

"Throw the book at 'em, I bet," George said. Sam winced and slid back into the pool.

"There's not a lot they can say to defend themselves. They'd obviously been planning to steal the bear for a year, and Jack was sitting right there with a weapon in his hand, waiting to knock Caroline Livingstone on the head."

"Surely any judge would understand that they never meant to kill her," Lily intervened. "You just have to look at the Coles to know they're not that kind of people."

Sam took as deep a dive as he could without hitting his head on the bottom, and thought again about bear people. It was no good saying the Coles weren't that kind of people, he thought, because if you took away something that someone wanted badly, there was no predicting what they might do.

He was just about out of air when another thought followed on the heels of the first one. His Uncle Edward, whom he'd succeeded in forgetting about for the past several hours, had been passionate all his life about Clairmont. Had he, when death had threatened finally to take it away from him, left it to Sam because Sam, of all the Bellamys, would feel duty-bound to keep it in the style to which

Uncle Edward had become accustomed?

Uncle Edward, Sam remembered suddenly as he broke the surface of the pool, had been known, in his youth, as Teddy. Hell, he thought.

The Cardinals were making we-must-be-going-now motions, as Sam had intended them to do. As he resurfaced, however, they seemed to realize that they'd talked only about their lives as bear people, and not at all about Sam.

"Are you just vacationing?" they asked him belatedly, as they paused at the pool gate, and Sam smiled at them suddenly and said no, as a matter of fact he was about to become a member of the landed gentry, in a mansion he'd just inherited from someone. He sounded so matter-of-fact about it that there was no way for the Cardinals to know that he'd just made up his mind or that they had had anything to do with the way the decision had gone.

They said goodbye, and when Sam discovered, later, that they'd left a bumper sticker saying "Bear With Me" on the rear bumper of his 1948 Ford pickup truck, he almost didn't mind at all.

FICTION

Flicks

by Bill
Crenshaw

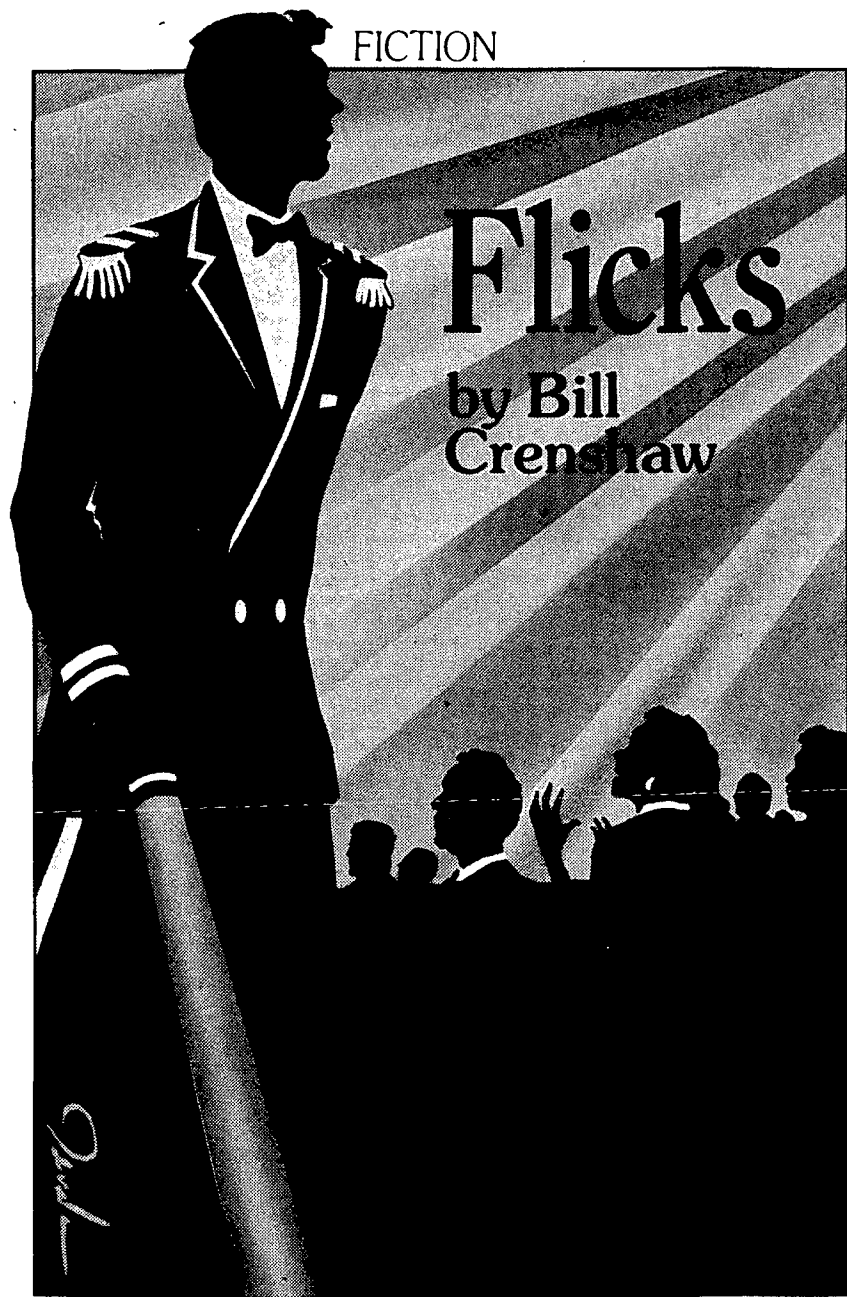


Illustration by Joe Jereda

Hhe knew it wasn't a question of if his beeper would go off.

This time Devin Corley was home, his apartment, had just opened a beer, turned on the TV, stretched out on the couch. He phoned in. Dispatcher said Majestic Theater, across town. He started the VCR, took a last pull at the beer, gave the cat fresh water, got a quick shower. Then he left. Speed was not of the essence.

He knew what he'd find. A body; Ray Tasco, his partner, taking statements, popping his gum, looking amused and surprised at once; Maggie Epps with her wedge face and her black forensic kit, diagramming the scene, scooping nameless little forensic glops into baggies; Joe Franks in a safari shirt, slung with cameras, smiling like always, always smiling, always angry. He'd give Corley grief about being away from his desk again, or being late. Corley had been away from his desk a lot. He was always late.

At the Majestic there were two uniforms in the men's john. The room was done in men's room tile, blue and white, smelled of urine, wet tobacco, stale drains, pine. Trash can on side, brown paper towels spilling out, balled up, dark with water, some with red smears.

Floor around sinks wet, scattered splashes and small pools. Hints of blood in wet footprints running back and forth across the tile. In near stall somebody retching. The uniform watching the somebody was pointedly not looking at him.

"What we got?" Corley asked the uniforms.

"Got a slashing, lieutenant," said the older uniform, twenty-six maybe, Lopez maybe. Corley glanced down at the name-tag. Lopez. The younger uniform looked green at the gills. Corley didn't know him, knew he wouldn't be green long, not this kind of green. Lots of greens in Homicide, green like Greengills, green like a two-day corpse, green like Corley, like old copper.

"In here?" Corley asked.

Lopez snapped his head back. "In the first theater."

Corley moved to the stall. Lopez moved beside him. Greengills went to the sink and splashed water on his face.

"Who we got?" said Corley.

"Pickpocket, he says. Says he just lifted the guy's wallet. Says he didn't know he was dead."

The pickpocket turned around, face pasty, hair matted. "I didn't know, man," he said, whiney, rocking. "Jesus, I didn't know. That was blood, oh god, that was blood, man, and I didn't even feel it. My

hands..." He grabbed for the john again. Corley turned away.

"Any of that blood his?" he asked.

"Don't think so."

The wallet was on the stainless steel shelf over the sinks. It was smeared with bloody fingerprints. Corley took out a silver pen and flipped the wallet open. "Find it in the trash can?"

"Yessir," said the younger uniform, wiping the water from his face, looking at Corley in the mirror.

"Money still in it? Credit cards?"

"Yessir."

The driver's license showed a fifty-five-year-old business type, droopy eyes, saggy chin, looking above the camera, trying to decide if he should smile for this official picture. Bussey, Tyrone Otis. Toccoa Falls, Georgia.

The pickpocket told Corley that he'd like seen this chubby dude asleep at the end of his row, which he'd seen him before with a big wad of cash in his wallet at the candy counter and seen him put the wallet inside his coat and not in his pants. Near the end of the flick when he got to the guy he kind of tripped and caught himself on the guy's seat and said sorry, excuse me, while lifting his wallet real neat, and he dropped the wallet into his popcorn box and headed right for the john

to ditch the wallet and just stroll out with the plastic and the cash, but in the john his hands were bloody and the guy's wallet and his shoes, and then he heard screaming in the lobby and he ditched the wallet and tried to wash the blood off but there was too much, the more he looked, the more he saw, and somebody came in and went out, so he tried to hide. He didn't know what was happening, but he knew it was real bad.

There was a spritzing noise and thin, piney mist settled into the stall and spotted Corley's glasses. Corley tore off a little square of toilet paper and smeared the spots around on the lenses. He had the pickpocket arrested on robbery and on suspicion of murder, but he knew he wasn't the killer.

"Victim here alone?" asked Corley.

"As far as we know," said Lopez.

"Convention, maybe. Is Tasco here? Do you know Sergeant Tasco?"

Joe Franks leaned into the restroom, cameras swinging at his neck. "Hey, Corley, you in on this or not? The meat wagon's waiting. Come show me what you want."

Corley smiled. "You know what I want."

"Yeah, show me anyway so if you don't get it all, you don't

blame me. Where've you been?"

"You shoot in here?"

"Yeah, I shot in here." He sounded impatient.

"You get the footprints?"

"Yeah, I got the footprints."

"Get the towels and the sink?"

"Yeah, the towels, the sink, and the stall, and the punk, and I even got a closeup of his puke, okay?"

"See, Joe," said Corley, smiling again, "you know exactly what I want."

"I hate working with you, Corley," said Franks as Corley pushed past him.

In the theater Maggie Epps was sitting on the aisle across from the body, sketchpad on her knees. "Glad you could make it, Devin," she said.

Corley fished for a snappy comeback, couldn't hook anything he hadn't said a hundred times before, said hello.

Franks showed Corley the angles he had shot. Corley asked for a couple more. The flashes illuminated the body like lightning, burned distorted images into Corley's retina.

Tasco came in, talking to somebody, squinting over his notebook. "Ray, you got the manager there?" Corley called.

"I'm the owner," the man said.

"Think you could give us some more light?"

"This is as bright as it gets, officer. This is a movie theater."

Corley turned back around. Franks snorted.

Mr. T. O. Bussey sat on the aisle in the high-backed chair, sagging left, head forward, eyes opened. Blood covered everything from his tie on down, had run under the seats toward the screen. People had tracked it back toward the lobby, footprints growing fainter up the aisle.

"You shoot that?" asked Corley.

Franks nodded. "Probably thought they were walking through cola."

Corley bent over Mr. Bussey. He put a hand on the forehead and raised the head an inch or two so that he could see the wound. "You see this?"

"Yeah. Want a shot?"

"Can I lift his head, Maggie?"

"Just watch where you plant your big feet," she said.

Corley stood behind Mr. Bussey, put his hands above the ears, and raised the head face forward, chin up. He turned his eyes away from the flashes.

"What did he get?" said Corley.

"Everything," said Maggie.

"Jugular, carotid, trachea, carotid, jugular. Something real sharp. This guy never made a sound, never felt a thing. Maybe a hand in his hair jerking his head back. Nothing after that."

"From behind?" Corley low-

ered the head back to

where he had found it.

"Left to right, curving up. You got your man in the john?"

"Don't think so. Too much blood on his shoes. He walked out in front, not behind."

"So what have you got?"

"Headache."

Maggie smiled. "It's going to get worse."

Corley smiled back. "It always does."

Corley made Greengills help bag the body. He could say that he was helping the kid get used to it, that it didn't get any better, that as bodies went this one wasn't bad, but he wasn't sure he had done it as a favor. He was afraid he'd done it to be mean.

They spent half an hour looking for the weapon. Corley didn't expect to find anything. They didn't.

He had a videotape unit brought over and sent Lopez and Greengills into the other theaters to block the parking lot exits and send the audiences through the lobby.

The owner pulled him aside and protested. Corley told him that the killer might be in another theater. The owner said something about losing the last *Deathdancer* audience and not needing any publicity hurting ticket sales and being as much a victim as that poor man. "I own nine screens in this town,"

he said, dragging his hand over his jaw. "I'm not responsible for this. Let's keep the profile low, okay?" There was nothing Corley could say, so he said nothing, and the owner bristled and said he had friends in this town. "I'll speak to your superior about this, Officer . . . ?"

"Corley," he said, walking away. "That's l-e-y."

The other movies ended and the audiences pushed into the lobby. Corley had them videotaped as they bunched and swayed toward the street. Two more uniforms arrived and he started them searching the other theaters for the weapon.

He left Tasco in charge and went to the station and hung around the darkroom while Franks did his printing and bitched about wasting his talent on corpses and about Corley's always wanting more shots and more prints than anybody else. Corley didn't bother to tell Franks again that it was his own fault, that Franks was the one who always waxed eloquent over his third beer and said that the camera always lied, that the image distorted as much as it revealed, that photographs were fictions. He had convinced Corley, so Corley always wanted more and more pictures, each to balance others, to offer new angles, so that reality became a sort of com-

promise, an average. Corley didn't say any of that again. He made the right noises at the right times, like he did when Franks said how he was going to quit as soon as he finished putting his portfolio together, as soon as he got a show somewhere.

Maybe Franks really was working on a project. Maybe he should be a real photographer. Corley didn't know. He knew Franks about as well as he could, down to a certain level, no further. He imagined that Franks knew him in about the same way. It wasn't the kind of thing they talked about.

Corley lifted a dripping print out of the fixer. "Why'd you become a cop anyway?" he said.

Franks took the print from him and put it back. It was hard to read Franks' eyes in the red light. "You're asking that like you thought there were real answers," Franks said.

Corley took the prints to his desk and did what paperwork he could. He worked until the sky got gray. By the time he stopped for doughnuts on the way home, the first edition of the *News* was in the stands. It didn't have the murder.

He thought sometimes there were real answers instead of just the same patterns and ways to deal with patterns and levels beyond which you couldn't go.

He thought sometimes that there was a way to get to the next level. He thought sometimes he'd quit, do insurance fraud, something. He thought maybe he hated his job, but he didn't know that either. He had thought there was something essential about working Homicide, essential in the sense of dealing with the essences of things, a job that butted as close to the raw edge of reality as he was likely to get, and how would he do insurance after that? But whatever kind of essence he was seeing, it was mute, images beyond articulation. None of it made any sense, and he was bone-marrow tired.

The landing at his apartment was dim, and as he slid his key into the second lock, he could see the peephole darken in the apartment next door. Half past five in the morning and Gianelli was already up and prowling. Corley stood an extra second in the rectangle of light from his apartment so that Gianelli could see who he was, whoever the hell Gianelli was besides a name on a mailbox downstairs, an eye at the peephole, the sounds of pacing footsteps, of a TV. Corley's cat sniffed at the flecks of dried blood on his shoes.

Corley tossed the paper and Franks' pictures on the desk, opened a can of smelly catfood,

had a couple of doughnuts and some milk. Then he rewound the tape in the VCR and stretched out on the couch to watch the program that the call to the theater had interrupted. It was a cop show. At the station they laughed at cop shows. Things made sense in cop shows. He fell asleep before the first commercial.

Corley woke up with the cat in his face again. He got a hand under its middle and flicked it away, watched it twist in the air, land on all fours, sit and stretch, lick its paws. It wasn't even his cat. The apartment had come with the cat and a wall of corky tile covered with pictures of the previous occupant. The super hadn't bothered to take them down. "Throw 'em away if you want," he'd said. "What do I care?" She was pale and blonde. An actress who never made it, maybe. A model. A photographer. Corley wondered what kind of person would leave a cat and a wall covered with her own image. He still had the pictures in a box somewhere. He used the cork as a dart board, to pin up grocery lists and phone numbers. After eight months he was getting used to the cat, except when it tried to lie in his face, which it always did when he fell

asleep on the couch. One of these times he was going to toss it out of the window, down to the street. Four floors down, it didn't matter if it landed on its feet or not.

He looked at his watch. Only nine thirty, but he knew he wouldn't get back to sleep. He might as well go in.

He stopped for doughnuts and coffee and the second edition. Big headline. HORROR FLICK HORROR. *Blood flowed on the screen and in the aisles last night at the Majestic Theater . . .* Great copy, he thought, great murder for the papers. Stupid murder in a stupid place. Not robbery. Not a hit, not on some salesman from upstate Georgia. Tasco would say somebody boozed, whacked, dusted. Corley didn't think so. This one was weird. There was something going on here, something interesting, a new level, maybe, something new. He sat for a long time thinking.

It was going on eleven by the time he dropped the paper on his desk.

"My kids love those things," said Tasco.

"What things?"

Tasco pointed to the headline. "Horror flicks."

Corley looked at the paper. The story was covered in green felt tip pen with questions about the case, with ideas, with an

almost unrecognizable sketch of the scene. Corley didn't remember doodling.

There was a tapping of knuckle on glass. Captain Hupmann motioned them into his office.

"Finally," said Tasco.

"How long you been waiting?" said Corley.

"Too long."

"Sorry." He knew the captain had been waiting on him, had made Tasco wait on him, too.

"Just go easy, okay?" Tasco said.

The captain shut the door and turned to Corley. "So where are we on this one?"

Tasco looked at Corley. Corley shrugged.

The captain started to snap something but Tasco flipped open his notebook. "Family notified," he said. "Victim in town for sales convention, goes to same convention every year, never takes wife. Concession girl remembers him because he talked funny, had an accent she meant, and he made her put extra butter on his popcorn twice and called her ma'am. Nobody else remembers him. Staying at the Plaza, single room, no roommate. They don't take roll at the meetings, so we don't know if he's been to any or if he's been seeing the sights." Tasco looked up, popping his gum, then looked at Corley.

"I think we've got a nut," said Corley. "Random. Maybe a one-shot, maybe a serial."

The captain raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Are we taking an interest in our work again?"

Corley shifted his weight.

"A nut," said the captain. "Ray?"

Tasco shrugged. "Seems reasonable, but we're not married to it. Might be a user flipped out by the flick."

The captain turned back to Corley. "Why did he pick Bussey?"

Corley could picture Bussey at the convention, anonymous in the city and the crowd, free to cuss and stay out late if he wanted, hit the bars and the lades, drink too much and smoke big cigars. But Mr. Bussey hadn't gone that far. He'd just gone to a movie he wouldn't be caught dead in at home.

"He sat in the wrong place," said Corley. "He was on the aisle. Quick exit."

"What quick exit? This is a theater, for chrissakes. This is public. You don't do a random in public." The captain drew his lips together. "Where do you want to go with this?" he asked finally, looking more at Tasco than Corley.

Corley looked at Tasco before answering. He hadn't told Tasco anything. "We want to talk to

the pickpocket again, the employees again. We've got some names from the audience, the paper had some more. We want them to see the tapes, see if they recognize somebody coming out of the other theaters. Ray wants to do more with Mr. Bussey's movements, see if there's some connection we don't know about."

"Okay," said the captain. "You've both got plenty of other work, but you can keep this one warm for a couple of days. Check the gangs. Maybe something there, initiation ritual, something. If it's some kind of hit, or if it's a user, it won't go far."

"I think it's a serial," said Corley.

"You mean you hope it's a serial," said the captain. "Otherwise you're not going to get him. That it?"

"Yessir," said Tasco.

"Oh, and Corley," the captain said as Corley was halfway through the door, "welcome back. Back to stay?"

They followed up with the employees and what members of the audience they could find, asked if they'd known anybody else in the theater, seen anything unusual, remembered someone walking around near the end of the movie. They showed them pictures of the pickpocket and

Mr. Bussey's driver's license, the tapes of the other audiences, asked if anyone looked familiar.

Corley tried to make himself ask the questions as if they were new, as if he'd never even thought of them before. Same questions, same answers, and if you didn't listen because it all seemed the same, you missed something. Tasco always asked the questions right and was somehow not dulled by the routine, by the everlasting sameness. Tasco hunkered down and did his job, would see the waste and the stupidity of it all, say, "Jeez, why do they do that, we got to get the SOB that did this, aren't people horrible." Tasco's saving grace was that he didn't think about it. Corley didn't mean that in a mean way. It was a quality he envied, maybe even admired. Welcome back, back to stay? Sometimes he wondered why he didn't just walk away from it all.

They got Maggie to draw a seating chart and they put little pins in the squares, red for Mr. Bussey, yellow for the people they questioned, blue in seats that yellows remembered being occupied. The media played the story and boosted ratings and circulation, and more people from the audience came forward, and others who claimed to have been there but who

Tasco said were probably on Mars at the time. The number of pins increased, but that was all.

"They sat all around him," said Corley, "and they didn't see anything."

"So who in this city ever sees anything?"

"Yeah, well, they should have seen something. Maybe they were watching the movie. Maybe we should see it."

They used their shields to get into the seven o'clock show. The ticket girl told them that the crowd was down, especially in *Deathdancer*. Tasco bought a big tub of popcorn and two cokes, and they sat in the middle about halfway to the screen.

The horror flicks that had scared Corley as a kid played with the dark, the uncertain, the unknown, where you might not even see the killer clearly, where you were never sure if the clicking in the night outside was the antenna wire slapping in the wind or the sound of the giant crabs moving. One thing might be another, and there was no way to tell, and you never really knew if you were safe.

But this wasn't the same. Here the only unknowns were when the next kid was going to get it and how gross it would be. A series of bright red brutalities, each more bizarre than

the last, more grotesque, more unreal. Corley couldn't take it seriously. But maybe the audience could. Unless they were cops or medics, maybe this was what it was like. Corley started watching them.

They were mostly under forty, sat in couples or groups, boys close to the screen or all the way to the wall and the corners, girls in the middle, turning their heads away and looking sideways; dates close, touching, copping feels; marrieds a married distance apart. They all talked and laughed too loud. On the screen the killer stalked the victim and the audience got quiet and focused on the movie. Corley could feel muscles stiffen, tension build as the sequence drew the moment out, the moment you knew would come, was coming, came, and they screamed at the killing, and after the killing sank back spent, then started laughing nervously, talking, wisecracking at the screen, at each other. Corley watched three boys sneak up behind a row of girls and grab at their throats, the girls shrieking, leaping, the boys collapsing in laughter. A girl chanted, "Esther wet her panties," and the whole audience broke up. On the screen, the killer started stalking his next victim and the cycle began again.

"What do you think?" asked Corley, lighting a cigarette as soon as they hit the lobby. People in line for the next show stared at their faces as if trying to see if they would be scared or bored or disgusted. Corley thought they all looked hopeful somehow.

Tasco shrugged, placid as ever. "It was a horror flick."

"Was it any good?"

"Who can tell? You'll have to ask my kids."

The summer wind was warm and filled with exhaust fumes.

"You wanta come up for a beer or something?" Corley asked.

Tasco looked at his watch. "Nah, better get back. Evelyn. See you tomorrow."

Corley thought about rephrasing it, asking if he wanted to stop in for a beer somewhere, but Tasco had already made his excuse. Used to be they'd have a beer once or twice a week before Tasco started his thirty minute drive back to Evelyn and the kids and the postage-stamp yard he was so proud of, but that was before Corley had moved across town, out of his decent apartment, with the courtyard and the pool, into what he lived in now. Tasco had been to the new place once only. He'd looked around and popped his gum and looked surprised and amused and inhaled his

beer and left. Corley was relieved that Tasco hadn't asked him why he'd moved. He asked himself the same thing.

After he fed the cat, Corley put on the tape of the audience leaving the other screens. At first they ignored the camera, looked away, pretended not to see it, nudged a companion, pointed discreetly. Some made faces and more people saw it, and more made faces or shot birds or mouthed, "Hi, Mom," or walked straight at the camera so that their faces filled the pictures, stuck hands or popcorn boxes in front of the lens, waved, mugged, danced, pretended to strip, to moon the camera, to kiss Corley through the TV screen.

They had taped three audiences. They acted about the same.

Before he went to bed, Corley posted the newspaper articles and Franks' pictures on the cork wall, with a shot of Mr. Bussey in the center.

The heat woke him. He lay sweating, disoriented, fingers knotted in sheets. The night light threw a yellow oval on the wall opposite, gave the room a focus, showed him right where he was. He hated the panic that came from not being sure. He took three or four deep, slow breaths.

He hadn't always had the night light. He hadn't always strapped an extra gun to his leg or carried two speedloaders in his coat pockets every time he went out. He hadn't always spent so much time in his apartment, in front of the TV, asleep in front of the TV, in bed. He tried not to think about it. He tried not to think.

It was too early to be up, too late to go back to sleep, too hot to stay in the apartment. He could make coffee and go to the roof before the sun hit the tar, could catch the breeze off the river, let the cat stalk pigeons.

While the coffee dripped he sat on the couch and looked at the pictures on the wall. In the central picture Mr. Bussey sat with head up and eyes open, like he was watching the movie, the wound like a big smile. Death in black and white. Not like the deaths in the movie. Real was more . . . something. Casual. Anticlimactic. Prosaic. Unaccompanied by soundtrack. Maybe Bussey wasn't really dead. Maybe it was just special effects. In the picture his hands held Mr. Bussey's head just above the ears. He wiped his palms on his shorts.

Mr. Gianelli's peephole darkened as Corley shut his door and the cat slid up the stairs. He was halfway to the landing when the door opened the width

of the chain and Gianelli's face pressed into the crack, cheeks bulging around the wood. Over his shoulder a room was lit by a television's multi-colored glow.

"I know what you're doing, young man," Gianelli called in a rasping voice.

"Sorry if I woke you," Corley said, kept climbing, smiled. Maybe thirty-eight seemed young to Gianelli.

"You leave my antenna alone," Gianelli said. "The one on the chimney. I been seventeen years in this building. I got rights. You hear me, young man? Next time my picture goes I'm calling a cop." He slammed his door and it echoed in the stairwell like a gunshot.

Corley beat Tasco to work.

"Whoa," said Franks on his way to the coffee pot. "On time and everything. You must have figured it out."

"Figured what out?" said Corley.

Franks smiled. "That you won't get fired for being late. You want out, you got to quit."

"So who wants out?"

"Who doesn't?"

Tasco had never said anything about Corley's being late. When Tasco came in, he didn't say anything about Corley's being early.

Another homicide came in and they spent the morning and

most of the afternoon down by the river and the warehouses, Tasco and Corley and Maggie and Joe and the smells of creosote and fish and gasoline. Some punk had taken a twelve-gauge to the gut, sawed-off, Maggie said, because of the spread and the powder burns, another drug hit as the new champions of free enterprise tried to corner the market. It wasn't going to get solved unless somebody rolled over. A crowd gathered at the yellow police line ribbons. Lopez and Greengills came in for crowd control. The paramedics bitched about hauling corpses. Greengills didn't seem to be bothered by the body.

It was late when they got back to the station.

"I'm going to the movie," said Corley. "I'm going to take our pickpocket. Want to come?"

"What for?"

"Like you said, maybe something in the movie freaked this guy. Maybe we can find something."

"I don't think we're going to get anywhere on this one."

"So you want to come, or not?" Tasco said no.

The pickpocket didn't want to go either. "My treat," Corley told him, not smiling.

Corley sat in Mr. Bussey's seat and told the pickpocket to reconstruct exactly what he had done, when he had done it. He got popcorn and grape soda like

Bussey, put the empties into the next seat like Bussey, concentrated on the movie, tried not to see the pickpocket in the corner of his eye, tried to ignore the feeling that his back was to the door, tried to control his breathing. He hated this, hated the dark, the people around him, the long empty aisle on his left, he felt full of energy demanding use, fought to sit still. Finally on the screen the killer reached for the last survivor and the background music shrieked, and Corley slumped left and lowered his head and sat, and on the screen the girl fought off the killer, and they rescued her just in time, and they killed the killer and comforted the girl, and they discovered that the killer wasn't dead and had escaped, and then Corley felt the pickpocket fall across him, heard his "Sorry," felt the wallet slide out of his coat only because he was waiting for it. He sat slumped over while the audience filed out, giggling or groaning or silent. He sat until a nervous usher shook him and asked him to wake up.

He found the pickpocket throwing up in the men's room.

"We're just going to leave this open for a while," said the captain. "Put the river thing on warm."

Tasco nodded, popping his gum. Corley said nothing.

"Problem, Devin?"

"I'd like to stay on this a while."

"Got something to sell? New leads? Anything?"

Corley shook his head. "Not really."

"Okay, then."

They went back to their desks.

"Learn anything last night?" asked Tasco.

Corley shrugged, remembering the dark, palpable and pressing; the icy air pushing into his lungs as he sat and waited, the effort to exhale; trying to concentrate on the movie, on what might have snapped somebody; and after, trying to help the pickpocket out of the stall, embarrassed for him now, and sorry, and the pickpocket twisting his elbow out of Corley's grip and tearing in half the twenty that Corley had stuffed into his shirt pocket, bloody money maybe, something, he wouldn't have it. "Not much," he said. "Bussey must have gotten it in that last sequence, like we thought."

"Funny, isn't it, all that stuff up there on the screen, and out in the audience some dude flicks out a blade and that's that."

"Yeah," said Corley. "That's that."

Corley found himself at a movie again that night, a horror flick near the university. He

sat on the aisle, last row, back to the wall. The movie looked the same as the other, felt the same, same rhythms, same victims, same bright gore. The audience was younger, more the age of the characters on the screen, and louder, maybe, but still much the same as the others, shouting at the screen, groaning, cracking jokes, laughing in the wrong places, trying to scare each other, strange responses, inappropriate somehow. They had come for the audience as much as the movie. They had come to be in a group.

He found himself the next night in another movie, on the aisle, last row, back to the wall, fingering the speedloader in his pocket, trying to remember why he was wasting his time there.

Near the end of the show, he saw a silhouette down front rise and edge toward the aisle, stop, and his guts iced as he saw it reach out its left hand and pull back someone's head, heard a scream, saw it slash across the throat with its right hand and turn and run up the aisle for the exit, coming right for him, too perfect. He braced, tightening his grips on the armrests, fought to sit, sit, as the silhouette ran toward him, then he stuck out a leg and the man went down hard and Corley was on him with his knee in the back and his gun behind the

right ear. He yelled for an ambulance, ordered the man to open his fist. The man was slow. Corley brought a gun butt down on the back of his hand. The fingers opened, and something bright rolled onto the carpet. Corley stared at it for a few seconds before he saw it was a tube of lipstick.

"It's only a game, man," said a voice above him, quavering. Corley looked up. The owner of the voice was pointing with a shaking finger to the bright red lipstick slash along his throat. "Only a game."

Corley cuffed them to each other and took them in. He was not gentle with them.

The papers had fun with the story. "Off-duty Detective Nabs Lipstick Slasher," said one headline. Corley posted the stories on the corkboard.

They gave him a hard time when he got to work, asked if he'd been wounded, if the stain would come out, warned him about the chapstick chopper. He didn't let it get to him.

What got to him was how much fun the slasher and his victim had. He tried to tell Tasco about it. He'd almost lost it, he said. He'd been shaking with rage, wanted to push them around, run them in hard, give them a dose of the fear of God, but it didn't sink in. They just

kept replaying it all the way into the station.

"You really didn't know for sure, did you?" the slasher had asked.

"Thought I was *gone*," said the victim. "For a second there I thought this was it." He laid his head back on the seat, his face suddenly blue fading to black as the unit passed under a street light. "Oh, wow," he said.

"Shut up," Corley had snarled. "Just shut the hell up." They had gone silent, then looked at each other and giggled.

"Drugs," said Tasco.

"They weren't looped. It was like they were, but they weren't. This guy, the victim—for all he knew it was the killer. He was scared shitless, Ray, and he loved it."

Tasco shrugged. "It's a cheap high. Love that rush, maybe. Or maybe it's like they're in the flick. Makes 'em movie stars. Everybody wants to be a movie star. Put a Walkman on your head and your *life's* a fucking movie."

"I just wish I knew what the hell was going on." Corley rocked back in his chair. "I'm going to a movie tonight. Want to come?"

Tasco stared at Corley for a second or two. "This on your own time?"

"You want to come, or not?"

"The river's on warm, remember? We're not going to get this one. It was a one shot." He paused a second. "You okay?"

Corley rocked forward. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's not supposed to mean anything. I only wanted . . ."

"All I did was ask if you wanted to go to a flick."

"Keep your voice down. Jesus. For six months you've been a walking burnout. I've been like partnered with a zombie . . ."

"I do my job, nobody can say I don't do my job."

"... now suddenly you're doing overtime. I'm your partner. I just want to know if you're okay, that's all."

"I'm fine," Corley snapped.

"Okay, great. I'm just asking."

Corley got up and crossed the squad room and refilled his coffee cup and sat back down. He took a sip, burned his tongue. "Yeah, well," he said, "thanks for asking. You want to come?"

Tasco shook his head. "It's going to be a long day without that."

It was a long day, but Corley made the nine o'clock at the Majestic. The ticket girl let him in on his shield again, said the numbers were up, really up. The lobby was crowded, people two deep at the candy counter,

clumped around video games, whooping over electronic explosions as someone blasted something on the screen. There were no seats left at the back or on the aisle, and Corley had to sit between two people. He kept his elbows off the armrests. During the movie the audience seemed more tense, everybody wide-eyed and alert, but he caught himself with knotted muscles more than once and thought the tension maybe was in him.

The lipstick game spread like bad news, and every night Corley ran in one or two slashers for questioning, and for anger, because it wasn't a game when he saw a head snap back or heard a scream, wasn't a game when the man moving down his row or running up the aisle might have a razor tucked in his fist. The games got elaborate, became contests with teams, slashers and victims alternating roles and tallying points in the lobby between shows. Sometimes someone would slash a stranger, and Corley broke up the fights at first, but later didn't bother, didn't waste time or risk injury for a pair of idiots. He went to movies every night that week, and every night he saw more people than the night before, and felt more alert and tense, and left more exhausted. His

ulcer flared like sulfur; he was smoking again.

On Friday night near the end of the movie his beeper went off and half the audience screamed and jumped and clutched in their seats, then sank back as a wave of relief swept over them and they gave themselves to laughter and curses and groans and chatter, ignoring the movie.

Corley phoned in from the lobby. They had found a body after the last show at the Astro. He had been slashed.

Corley was strangely pleased.

“Could be some frigging copycat,” said Tasco the next day, yawning.

Corley wasn't sleepy. “No way,” he said. “Exactly the same.”

“The paper had the details.”

“It's the same guy, Ray.”

“Okay, okay,” said Tasco, palms up. “Same guy.”

The routine began again, interviews, hunting up the audience, blue and yellow pins, lack of a good witness. Tasco asked where they'd sat, what they'd seen, who they'd known. Corley asked them why they'd gone, whether they'd liked it, if they went to horror flicks often, if they'd played the assassin games. They didn't know how to answer him. He made them uncomfortable, sometimes an-

gry, and they addressed their answers to Tasco, who looked amused and popped his gum and wrote it all down.

Corley posted the new pictures on the corkboard, and the articles and the editorials, and the movie ads. Various groups blasted the lipstick game, called for theaters to quit showing horror movies, called for theaters to close completely. Corley's theater owner wrote a guest editorial calling on readers not to be made prisoners by one maniac, not to give in to the creatures of the night. The Mo-viola ads promised armed guards; the Majestic dared people to come to the late show. The corkboard was covered by the end of the week, a vast montage filling the wall behind the blank television.

Tasco went with him to the movies now. There were lines at every ticket window, longer lines every night. The Mo-viola's security guards roamed the lobby and aisles; the Majestic installed airport metal detectors at the door; the Astro frisked its patrons, who laughed nervously, or cracked wise like Cagney or Bogart, and the guards made a big production when they found tubes of lipstick, asked if they had a license, were told it was for protection only or that they were collectors or with the FBI.

They were all having a great time. The ticket girl said they gave her the creeps.

"That's two of us," Corley said.

Corley and Tasco sat on opposite sides of the theater, on the aisle, backs to the wall, linked with lapel mikes and earphones. Fewer and fewer played the lipstick game, but the audiences seemed electric and intense; Corley felt sharp and coiled, felt he could see everything, felt he was waiting for something.

After the movies, when he came home drained and sagged down on the couch, Corley found himself staring at the wall, at the picture of T. O. Bussey looking out at him from the aisle seat, his hands holding up the head, and he felt like he didn't know anything at all.

Corley turned off his electric razor and turned up the radio. An early morning DJ was interviewing a psychiatrist about the slasher. Corley knew he'd give the standard whacko profile, a quiet, polite, boy-next-door type who repressed sex and hated daddy, and that everybody who knew him would be surprised and say what a nice guy he was and how they could hardly believe it. He got his notebook to write it down so

he could quote it to Tasco.

"Said he was 'quiet, withdrawn, suffers repressed sexuality and sexual expression, experiences intense emotional build-up and achieves orgasm at climax of movie and murder, cycle of build-up and release, release of life, fluids, satisfaction.'" He flipped the notebook shut.

"Jeez, I hate that," said Tasco. "I hate the hell out of that. That doesn't mean squat. That's just words. Who is he, gets paid to say crap like that? He doesn't know anything."

"I want to talk to this guy," said Corley. "I just want to sit down and talk to him, you know? I just want to buy him a drink or something and ask him what the hell is going on."

"You mean the shrink?" Tasco was squinting.

"Our guy," said Corley. "The slasher."

Tasco didn't say anything.

"He knows something," said Corley.

Tasco looked angry again. "He doesn't know anything. What are you talking about?"

Corley tried to say what he meant, couldn't find it, couldn't make it concrete. Why was it so important to get this guy, see him, find out what he looked like, why he did it, not why, exactly, but how, maybe, how in the sense of giving people a

chance to maybe have their throats cut, and having them line up like it was a raffle? What would that tell him about what was driving him off the street, what kept drawing him back down, why he was carrying an extra piece, what kept him in that lousy apartment in the middle of all of this tar and pavement when he could just walk away? What did he want?

"He knows something about people," Corley said finally.

Tasco waved his hand like he was fanning flies. "What could he know? He's just a sicko . . ."

"Come on, Ray, we've seen sickoes. They don't slash in public, not like this."

Anger was in both voices now.

"Maybe they do. Maybe he just wanted to see if he could. Ever think of that? Maybe it's the thrill of offing somebody in front of a live audience. Maybe that's all."

"Yeah, that's all, and all those people out there know he's out there, too, and they can't stay away. Why can't they stay away, Tasco?"

"We can't just keep going to movies, Devin. We got lives, you know."

"We're not going get him unless we get him in the act."

"That's just stupid. That won't happen. That's a stupid thing to say."

"Watch it, sergeant."

"Oh, kiss it, Corley. Jesus."

They were silent again, avoiding each other's eyes.

"I just want to bust this guy," said Corley.

"Yeah, well," said Tasco, looking out of the window, "what I want is to go home, see my wife and kids, maybe watch a ball game." He looked back to Corley. "So, we going out again tonight or what?"

They went again that night and the next night and the next. They always sat on the aisle at opposite ends of the last row so that they could cover both rear exits. Tasco would sit through only one show; Corley sat through both. He felt better when Tasco was at the other end, when he could hear him clear his throat, or mutter something to himself, or even snore when he nodded off as he sometimes did, which amazed Corley. Corley stayed braced in his seat.

When Tasco left, Corley felt naked on the aisle, so he'd move in one seat and drape a raincoat across the aisle seat so it looked occupied, so no one would sit there. The nine o'clock show was usually a sell-out, the audience filling every seat and pressing in on him, a single vague mass in the dark at a horror flick, hiding a man with

a razor, maybe even inviting him, desiring him, seeking him. After five nights Corley was ragged and jumpy.

"I'm going to sit in the projection booth," he told Tasco. "Better view."

Tasco shrugged. "End of the week and that's it, okay?"

"We'll see."

"That's got to be it, Devin."

The booth gave Corley a broader view, and gave him distance, height, a thick glass wall. At first he felt conspicuous whenever a pale face lifted his way as the audience waited for the movie to start. The manager showed him how to override the automatics and turn up the house lights, otherwise hands off. The projector looked like a giant Tommy gun sighted on the screen through a little rectangle outlined on the glass in masking tape. He had expected something more sophisticated.

Tasco was just out of sight below him, left aisle, last row, back to the wall. Through his earphone, Corley could hear the audience from Tasco's lapel mike, a general murmur, a burst of high-pitched laughter, the crying of a baby who shouldn't even be there. Corley wiped his glasses on his tie. Hundreds of people out there, could be any one of them, and what the hell were the rest of them doing out

there, and what the hell was he doing up here?

The lights dimmed and the projector lit up, commercials, previews, the main feature. A little out-of-focus movie danced in the rectangle on the glass, blobs of color and movement bleeding out onto the masking tape; the soundtrack was thin and tinny from the booth speaker and just half a beat behind in the earphone, disconcerting. Beyond the glass, on exhibition, the audience stirred and rippled; beyond them the huge and distorted images filled the screen. He watched, and when someone stood and moved toward the aisle, he warned Tasco and felt adrenaline heat arms and legs and the figure reached the aisle and turned and walked toward restroom or candy counter, and Corley tried to relax again. It was easier to relax up here, above it all.

The movie dragged on. Corley found by staring at a central point in the audience and unfocusing his eyes, he could see all movement instantly, and everybody was moving, scratching ears and noses and scalps, lifting hands to mouths to cover coughs or to feed, rocking, putting arms around dates, leaning forward, leaning back, covering eyes with fingers. Again he saw the patterns emerge around the on-screen

killings, movements ebbing as the killing neared, freezing at the death itself, melting after, and flowing across the audience again, strong and choppy, then quieter and smooth. He had to concentrate, breathe slowly and carefully, to keep himself from narrowing his vision, focusing on one person. He didn't see the movie.

A flicker in the corner of his eye, flick of light on steel. He swung eyes right, locked on movement, saw the head pulled back, the blade flicker again, realized it was happening, that he hadn't seen the killer move down the row because he was sitting right behind his victim, it was happening now, all the way across the theater from Tasco. He radioed Tasco as he turned for the stairs and punched the lights, heard Tasco yell for the man to stop, knew they were too late for the victim, but they had him now, they had him now, they had him now. He took the stairs three at a time, slipped, skidded down arms flailing, wrenched his shoulder as he tried to break the fall, then on his feet and bursting through the door behind the concession stand, drawing his pistol as he ran, putting out his left arm and vaulting over the counter, popcorn and patron flying. He stopped in front of the double doors, pistol leveled, waiting

for the maniac to run into his arms.

Nobody came. Corley crouched, frozen, pistol extended in two hands, and in his left ear the theater, voices and screams and music, and Tasco maybe, Tasco shouting something, and still nobody came. He moved forward, gun still extended, and jerked open a door with his left hand.

Lights still brightening, movie running, and the screams and shouts and music in the earphone echoed, echoed in his right ear and for an instant he lost where he was. Then he heard Tasco calling him in his earphone and saw him trying to hammer his way into a knot of people below the screen, the rest of the audience in their seats, watching the movie or those down front attacking the slasher.

Corley ran down the aisle, yelling for Tasco. The earphone went dead and Tasco was gone. Corley reached the mass, started pulling people out of his way, stepping on them, pushing. Some pushed back and turned on him, and he knocked one down and another man grabbed him, and he hit the man in the face, and backed toward the wall, gun leveled. The man changed his mind, backed away. Corley called Tasco, heard nothing through the earphone. He tried to elbow his way in the

crowd, started clubbing with both hands around the pistol, fighting the urge to just start pulling the trigger and have done with it. A huge man turned and started to swing; Corley watched the fist come around in slow motion, easily deflected the blow, put a knee in the solar plexus, watched the man fall like a great tree, cuffed him across the jaw as he went down, felt that he could count the pores in the potato nose. They were right beneath the speakers, the music pounding his bones. He reached for the next one in his way.

He heard a shot, saw Tasco cornered by four or five, his gun pointed toward the ceiling but lowering. The next one wouldn't be a warning shot and those guys knew it and they weren't backing off. Corley tried to shout above the music, raised his pistol and fired toward the ceiling, fired again, heard Tasco's gun answer, fired a third time, and the crowd started breaking at the edges, some hurt, some bloody. Corley tried to hold them back, grabbed at one who twisted away, and they pushed past, ignoring him, laughing or shouting, and the others were leaving their seats now, mixing with them, and some in their seats were applauding and cheering.

There were people lying all around them, some groaning,

some bleeding. The slasher's victim sprawled across an aisle seat, throat opened to the stars painted on the ceiling. "Help me, Jesus," someone was saying over and over. "Jesus, help me." He heard someone calling his name, saying something. It was Tasco.

"I couldn't stop them," Tasco was saying. Corley looked down. They had used the slasher's blade, and whatever else was handy. The slasher's features were unrecognizable, the head almost severed from the body. A sudden fury flashed through Corley, and he kicked the person lying nearest to him. "Couldn't stop them," Tasco repeated, his voice trembling.

"Is this him, do you think?" asked Corley.

Tasco didn't say anything.

"Maybe Maggie can tell us," said Corley. "Maybe the M.E." He could hear the desperation in his voice.

"It could be anybody," said Tasco.

When he used the phone in the ticket office to call it all in, he heard people demanding a refund because they hadn't gotten to see the end of the movie.

Corley didn't get home until late the next afternoon. He'd made it through the last eighteen hours by thinking about the crummy little apartment

high above the street, with the couch and the double locks and the television. He heard the cat yowling before he even put the key in the first lock.

He fed the cat and opened a beer, and turned on his television, but the pictures were wrong, fuzzy, filled with snow. He tried to fix the image, but nothing worked, and he grew angry. Finally he checked the roof and found his antenna bent over.

"Gianelli," he shouted, pounding, standing to one side of the door, seeing an image of Gianelli spinning in slow motion toward pavement four floors down. "Come out of there, Gianelli." No answer. He spread the name out, kicking on the door once for each syllable. "*Gianelli!*"

"You go away now," came a voice from inside. "You go away. I'm calling the cops."

"*I am a cop,*" Corley shouted,

dragging out his shield and holding it to the peephole.

"You go away now," Gianelli said after a moment of silence.

Corley gave the door one last kick.

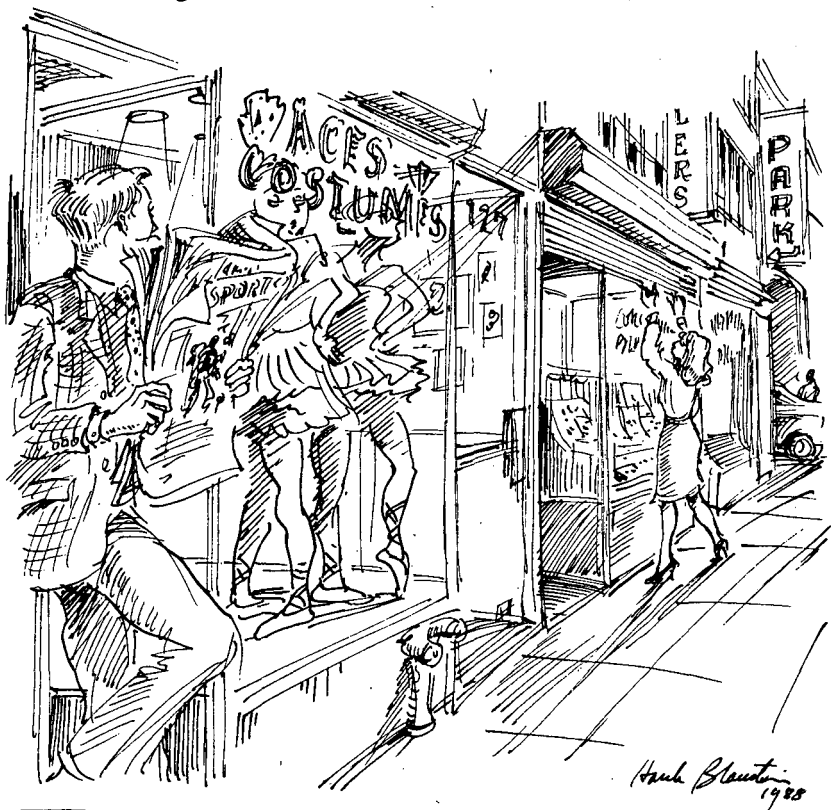
He tried to salvage the antenna, but Gianelli had done a job on it, twisting the cross-pieces, cutting the wires into a dozen pieces.

Before he went to sleep, he took down the pictures and clippings about Mr. Bussey, and he dug around until he found the pictures of the previous occupant, and he pinned them all up. He crossed the room and sat on the couch to look at them. They were all black and white, blonde and pale eyes, and he wondered if she had walked away from whatever brought her here. He thought she was very beautiful. But who could tell from pictures?

He locked the doors and cut on the night light.

Situation Wanted

by Stephen Wasylyk



The train was late. The train was almost always late, which was why Falco Weaver found himself unemployed. If his employer had heard of flex time, it was a concept he considered not applicable to his business.

If I wanted you to work from nine thirty to six, Falco, I'd have said so. I wanted you to work from eight thirty to five like the rest of us, but that seems to be too much trouble.

The job hadn't been much. Still, it was the only one he'd

found after weeks of searching, and to be on time every day, he'd have had to drive, which was no solution at all. The monthly fee at the parking garage up the street would have left him with the choice of keeping his apartment and living on bread and water, or eating well and living in his car.

Practice and long, twenty-four-year-old legs made him first out the door and up the stairway after the train squealed and rumbled to a stop. At the head of the stairs, he glanced back. The passengers thundering after him always reminded him of a herd of cattle stampeding toward an open gate in the corral and if he didn't keep moving, he'd be trampled underfoot.

The few minutes he'd always saved hadn't helped him keep the old job, but they might mean something in the interview for this new one.

He left the train station walking fast, cutting in and around the heavy, work-bound pedestrian traffic, challenging the nose-to-bumper vehicles at the intersections, and stopping only when stepping from the curb would have guaranteed an indefinite stay in the nearest hospital.

Twelfth Street. Eleventh. At Tenth, he turned the corner twenty minutes late. Fewer

people here, the small, glass-fronted shops not drawing much in the way of shoppers this early. He lengthened his stride like a runner driving for the finish and it was the stride that plummeted him into the short, muscular, masked man backing out of the jewelry shop with a bag in one hand and a gun in the other.

Tall, thin, and outweighed by fifty pounds, Falco came to an instant stop as the man's shoulder caught him in the chest, his breath leaving his body in a loud *woof*, paralyzing him just long enough for a hand the size of a small ham to grab his tweed jacket with a death grip, spinning him as a shield against the muzzle of a small but deadly looking gun aimed with both hands by a dark-haired young woman in a gray suit crouching in the doorway of the shop.

Three thoughts flashed into Falco's mind: while no Miss America, the young woman was very attractive; she was prepared to shoot; and he had damned well better let her know he was only an innocent bystander.

He raised his hands weakly and croaked, "Don't shoot!"

The eyes above the gun were as dark and cold as his father's farm pond in mid-winter, and he was sure his message was about to be ignored when the

fist jabbed at his back and the masked man yelled, "*Pick up the bag!*"

He glanced down. To grab him, the masked man had had to drop his loot and it now lay at his feet, a tan, glistening shopping bag with hand loops and the jeweler's name printed in dark brown, the prevalent cheap plastic replacement for the reliable, honest-to-goodness paper sack, almost impossible to open, so slick it could be only be picked up by the hand loops and so flimsy it was hazardous to carry anything weighing more than four ounces.

The hand jabbed. "*Pick it up!*"

Not knowing about the necessity of looping his fingers through the holes, Falco tried. His fingers squeezed, the sleazy plastic slipped on the contents as though they had been lubricated, and the bag spewed a variety of sparkling jewelry over the sidewalk, morning light dancing from gold, silver, and gems, bringing a gasp from the until-then silent and horrified spectators.

The masked man screamed, "Goddam dummy!" and whacked Falco over the head with his pistol for screwing up the results of his morning's effort.

Falco's eyes had focused on an elaborate neckpiece studded with diamonds that had skid-

ded to the woman's feet. As he pitched forward, the facets caught and held the light in a thousand gleaming points that blurred and blended and seemed to explode in his head.

When he regained consciousness, his eyes focused on the tiny ridges in the dirty cement inches away, his head throbbing but his brain still functioning. He couldn't have been out for more than a moment. The police cars were only now wailing to a halt at the curb and someone was tugging at his shoulder. He pushed the hand away, rolled and sat up, feeling the back of his head gingerly, wincing when his hand found the lump. He looked at his fingers. Dry. Good. The last thing he needed was blood on the collar of his only clean shirt.

Two short, fat men were scrambling around on their hands and knees collecting the scattered jewelry and stuffing it into their pockets. Falco blinked. They were identical. That bump on the head must have given him double vision.

The young woman in the gray suit was kneeling beside him, her face concerned.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll live. What time is it?"

Puzzled, she glanced at her watch. "Ten thirty."

"Damn." Falco struggled to his feet.

"Wait here." She ran to meet the police.

Wait here? What in the hell for? Clutching his aching head, he pushed through the ring of staring people. He was a half hour late but he might be able to explain. Not by telling his interviewer what had really happened, though. No one would believe it.

The interviewer was a dark-haired man in his middle thirties, wearing an expensive suit and a smile so brilliant it made Falco's headache throb. He called him by his first name with a warmth that would have indicated they had been golfing buddies for years. Falco was sure he had received top grades in Inter-Personal Communication Skills II.

He had also led the class in *Letting Them Down Gently*, his smile touched with a neon glow and his handshake hearty when he said, "We'll study your application thoroughly. You should know in a few days."

Falco knew he'd never hear from him again. Wishing he had a couple of aspirin tablets, he stopped at a water cooler, sipping from the cup slowly. Across the corridor, a doorway opened up on a large room.

Desks, each with a computer, were jammed together in long rows. If he had been hired, he'd have been in there at one of

them, and he had the feeling that he'd sink slowly into that sea of dark green rectangles with bright white letters flashing like whitecaps until he became just another electrical impulse triggered by the touch of a plastic key.

It dawned on him that actually looking for a job had little in common with all the advice he'd heard and read, and finding one he liked would be far more difficult than finding one at all.

He picked up a small tin of aspirin in a drugstore, a newspaper at a stand, and found a corner table in a cafeteria where he could spread out the classified section while sipping coffee. He made three phone calls and landed two interviews, one of which he walked out on because the place was too similar to the one that morning and he knew he'd be interviewed by another Smiling Human Resources Person. The second was better, a small company where the interviewer was a harried, middle-aged woman with a pencil thrust into her hair who looked at him suspiciously over half spectacles the way his mother had always done when she'd asked where he'd been. Still, he felt comfortable. He just might get the job.

The home-heading crowd was thick in the streets. There was

no more he could do today.

Home again, home again, jiggety jig.

They told him he was crazy to live in the suburbs if he wanted to work in the city, but he'd grown up with green space around him and damned if he'd live surrounded by bricks and cement.

He was standing, rocking with the train's motion and scanning the story of a holdup in the afternoon tabloid he'd picked up when he realized he was reading about *his* holdup that morning. He hadn't recognized it immediately because of the headline:

25 GRAND NECKLACE
NOT RECOVERED
IN ABORTED HEIST

and the rest of the story bore little resemblance to what had actually happened.

According to the security person, Sonya O'Brien, the masked man had dropped the loot when he collided with a passing pedestrian and had run off. The pedestrian had also disappeared. So had the necklace, even though the rest of the jewelry had been scooped from the sidewalk by the two owners, twin brothers named Constantine. The story ended with a simple sentence:

The police are not only look-

ing for the holdup man, but also the unidentified passerby.

Nothing about Muscles taking him temporary hostage, nothing about staring into the muzzle of her gun, nothing about his being hit on the head.

He touched the lump tenderly to make sure *he* wasn't wrong.

What the hell.

Muscles hadn't hit him hard enough to scramble his brains. He knew damned well that necklace was at her feet when he'd passed out. Where it was when he came to he had no idea because he hadn't looked for it, but it must have been gone by then. The scrambling Constantine brothers would have grabbed it first if they'd seen it. As the story said, it was worth as much as the rest of the loot.

None of the spectators could have taken it. They'd been too far away. He sure as hell hadn't, so that left just one person. Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien. And she was obviously trying to hang it on him.

He folded the paper thoughtfully, not knowing whether to be angry, scared, or both.

She couldn't have picked a better candidate. He'd have a hard time selling his story to the police. Who would have more use for a twenty-five thousand dollar necklace than a skinny simpleton looking for a

job? Even at ten cents on the dollar, it was found money, assuming he knew how and where to get rid of it.

They might not be able to do anything more than give him a hard time, which he certainly didn't need, but he wasn't even sure of that. All Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien had to do was swear she saw him take it. His word against hers wouldn't be worth much.

Listen, we know how it is. You need a job. You need money. And there's the necklace. You grab it and take off. Wasn't that the way it was? Or maybe you and your buddy had an arrangement. He was supposed to pass the loot to you as he left the store in case he was caught, but the bag was fumbled so you made the best of a broken play. Is that it? Tell you what, Falco. We'll make a deal. If you picked up the necklace and ran, all you have to do is return it. If it was a broken play, give up the necklace and your friend. Either way we lose you in the paperwork and you walk away.

He'd be crazy to tell them he was the unknown passerby.

There were two things he could do. One was to forget it and let Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien establish her nice little mutual fund nest egg from the proceeds. The odds of finding him were so remote he

had a better chance of winning a multi-million dollar sweepstakes.

The other was to look up Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien. While she didn't know where to find him, he knew where to find her, and tossing a few banana peels under her size six and a halves would be a pleasure. The Constantine brothers deserved to know their security person was a crook. They might even recover the necklace and give him a reward.

At the next stop, he crossed the platform and caught an inbound train.

Half an hour later, he was standing before the plate glass window of the theatrical costume shop a few doors up the street, backdropped by floating mannequins in pink tutus and pretending to read his newspaper, hoping he looked as though he were waiting for someone inside. The rush hour crowd had dwindled considerably, the city beginning to close down for the night.

Inside the jewelry shop, the Constantine brothers appeared and reappeared while Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien sat in a corner on a stool, absorbed in a thick book.

One by one, the small shops began to close, many lowering iron grates over their windows, and the lines leaving the com-

mercial buildings thinned to an occasional leisurely stroller in no hurry to get home. The torrent of traffic in the canyon of the street had eased to a trickle, leaving Falco feeling more exposed with each passing minute.

At six, she emerged, lowered steel bars over the display windows, and went back inside. Ten minutes later, the lights went out except for one in the rear of the shop and they all left, the brothers going in one direction, she in the other.

Remaining on his side of the street, Falco followed, the clone of hundreds of other mind-numb commuters wending their way homeward with tabloids clutched under their arms.

Two squares away, she turned into a large parking garage and Falco panicked. He hadn't anticipated she would have a car. Somehow he had imagined that she would walk, perhaps to a meeting with a sleazy underworld character to dispose of the necklace, but she might not have had the opportunity to call one as yet. He wished he knew how these things worked.

Whatever. He couldn't afford to let her get away now. If she disposed of the necklace tonight, there would be no evidence.

He sprinted across the street in time to see her enter an el-

evator, fortunately alone. The indicator light stopped at Level Two. He didn't wait. He ran for the stairway.

Panting, he peered out of the door at Level Two. Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien was nowhere in sight, the only place she could be somewhere in a cluster of cars in the far corner.

Unsure of what he'd do if he caught up to her, he headed toward the cluster and peered from around a massive concrete pillar.

Something hard jabbed into his back and a feminine voice laced with menace softly said, "Freeze, turkey."

Falco jabbed his hands toward Level Three and froze.

"Turn around."

She was crouched the way she'd been that morning, the gun leveled in both hands, eyes narrowed.

The eyes widened. "Oh. It's only you."

Falco began to breathe again. "Only me? What does that mean?"

The gun barrel slowly moved from side to side in denial. "I'll ask the questions. Why did you run off this morning?"

"I had a job interview, and being unemployed, I gave that top priority," said Falco stiffly.

"Get the job?"

"No."

"I'm not surprised. I saw

someone watching the store and then follow me, but I didn't recognize you from a distance. What made you come back?"

Falco's arms were tiring and he was getting a little angry. If she wanted to shoot him, fine. He threw the tabloid at her feet.

"Did you think I'd let you get away with that phony story you gave the newspaper? Making it look as though I stole the necklace? Getting the hell scared out of me and bashed in the head wasn't enough. No, you had to make me look like a crook. I know damned well where that necklace went. You took it."

She slipped the gun into the blue bag suspended from her shoulder. It was the first time he had seen her up close without the gun's covering half her face. It was a considerable improvement.

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Yeah, sure. They'd have believed me. You probably fixed that. What I should have done was go to the Constantine brothers and tell them what kind of security they have."

She smiled. "What's your name?"

"Just call me Unidentified Passerby."

"Well, listen, Unidentified. Someone like you shouldn't be out alone in the big city. Know-

ing how to cross the streets just isn't enough. Go back to where you came from."

"I just might do that, but not before you turn in that necklace. What kind of security person are you? Get into the business so that you could rip off the people who hire you without being suspected?"

She looked at the ceiling. "Lord, hasn't the day been hard enough without sending this turkey to bug me?"

"That's pretty good," said Falco. "A praying crook."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "I should ignore you, but somehow your opinion of me matters, so let me tell you this. The necklace is in the store safe. I told the reporter it had disappeared for a very good reason."

"Aha. Working with the Constantine brothers to collect the insurance?"

"No, dummy. Think back. Where did you last see the necklace?"

"At your feet."

"And who was the only other person who could have seen it there? And after reading the story, come to the same conclusion you did?"

Falco frowned. "The holdup man?"

"You're so smart I can't understand why you're unemployed. He could have come up

with only two answers. The first, just as you said, the Constantine brothers faking a claim for insurance, but those two have a reputation for honesty that would make Abe Lincoln look like a pathological liar. And he would know that, because he specializes in jewelry shops. This morning was his fourth. Always the same man. Built like a human battering ram and knowing which shop to hit and when. This morning was a big surprise. He thought that all he had to deal with was two fat gentlemen who would give him no problem. Instead he ran into me, and I'd have had him if you hadn't gotten in the way."

A garage attendant had passed, glanced at them, and now screamed by in one of the cars, brakes squealing as he slammed down the ramp.

Falco spread his hands.

"What can you expect from a country bumpkin dumb enough to walk into him just as you were about to blow him away?" He looked at her closely. "Would you really have shot him?"

"If I had to. I've just gone into this business and nailing him would have been a big step forward. It still might be. He assumed what you did—that I saw an opportunity to pick up some easy money, which was what I wanted. He called this

afternoon and offered to save me the trouble of fencing the necklace on my own. I'd take a little less but eliminate the risk. I told him that sounded fine."

"Wasn't that a little nervy on his part?"

"Not really. I could hardly trace the call, and if I went along, his morning wouldn't have been wasted."

"You're not really going to meet with him."

"Didn't I tell you that's why I planted the story?"

Falco smiled. "I apologize for thinking you set me up. I assume you've arranged for the police to be there."

"Don't be so damned naive. I'm not sharing this. I'm taking him alone. It will make my reputation."

"Are you nuts? What do you think he'll do when he finds out you don't have the necklace? Go along peacefully?"

Falco's voice had been rising.

As he passed, a patron who wisely preferred to pick up his own car smiled indulgently and said, "Just kiss her and apologize, pal, even if you're right. You'll never win."

She headed toward the elevator. "No risk, no glory, Unidentified."

Falco caught up to her. "Wait. Aren't you taking your car?"

"My car isn't here. When I

saw you following me, I wanted to get you somewhere I could handle you. No place better than the half empty floor of a parking garage."

When they reached the street, she held out her hand.

"Sorry the story misled you, Unidentified. Now go home and concentrate on writing some dynamite resumes. I have work to do."

"You shouldn't meet him alone," said Falco firmly.

"Go home." She started walking.

"No. I can't let you meet Muscles without some protection."

She stopped. "Unidentified, we're about the same age. Mind if I ask what you've been doing for the last six years?"

"Earning a master's in English literature. Unfortunately, the demand is low at the moment for someone with my qualifications."

She jabbed an index finger in his chest to emphasize each point. "I spent two years majoring in criminology, joined the police force, earned my degree at night, saved some money, and resigned to open a security agency because I saw an opportunity there. You spent the time in the cloistered halls of academe, so what good are you to me? You aren't even carrying an annotated volume of Shakespeare to hit him with."

She resumed walking.

"Make up your mind to it," said Falco. "I'm coming along."

"Keep it up, turkey, and the first cop I see, I turn you in for annoying me."

"Do that. I'll tell them we were in collusion this morning. You took the necklace but now you refuse to give me my share. They'll be so confused, they'll take both of us in to straighten it out. Goodbye Mr. Muscles and your big bust. Why don't you simply explain where you're meeting him so we can come up with a little plan? We can't go barging in together."

She faced him, eyes narrowed.

"I don't know why you're making an ass of yourself, aside from some damn fool romantic notion that I'm a helpless female and I need protection, but let me explain so that even an English literature major can understand. This is not a romantic comedy. This is greed and guns and live bullets. Someone could be shot and I'm fairly certain it won't be me, but not unless I'm free to concentrate on what I'm doing. I'm not a fool. I've been a sitting duck since I left the store and I can't keep an eye on what is going on around me while arguing with you. To put it simply, you can get me killed. Now get the hell away from me."

Her face was set and hard and for the first time Falco sensed the strain she was under. She'd tossed bait to a shark and the shark had bitten, but she had no guarantee he wouldn't try to take her at the same time. All he was doing was rocking the boat.

He smiled. "You're right, Miss Security Person Sonya O'Brien. I apologize. I would probably be of no help at all. Good luck. I'll check the morning paper to see how you made out."

He stepped from the curb and crossed the street, turning when he had gone about twenty yards to look after her and feeling as though he had lost something.

She was walking away from him rapidly, the clicking of her heels suddenly drowned by the roar of an engine as a car shot past him, the sound full of menace. No reason to accelerate like that on a downtown street. Falco took a few hesitant steps after it, unsure that it had anything to do with her at all until the car swerved and cut her off by riding up over the curb, the heavy driver out of the seat, a gun in his hand, before she could react. Falco sprinted, guilt and fear driving him. Anything that happened to her was his fault. He'd made her angry, and anger destroys caution.

The muscular man looped an overhand punch at her head

which she was quick enough to take on her shoulder, the force of it spinning her and knocking her off her feet.

The man leaned forward and tore the shoulder bag from her and straightened to see Falco charging. The gun came up, steadied and fired just as Falco reached the curb, leaped, and belly-rolled in a classic high jump maneuver, his feet smashing into Muscles' chest and driving him into the car as Falco landed catlike on all fours and scrambled to face him, but the man, eyes glazed, was slowly sliding down the side of the car to the sidewalk.

Sonya O'Brien was on her knees, clutching her shoulder.

"Anything broken?" asked Falco.

Her face was white, shock still in her eyes, but her voice was level. "Everything's numb."

Her bag had burst open when Muscles had dropped it. A loop of a necklace projected, the diamonds glittering.

Feeling an emptiness inside, Falco touched it with his toe.

"He knew I'd have it with me," she said. "I guess he didn't see any point in negotiating if he could get it for nothing."

A police car was wailing toward them.

"You told me it was in the store safe," said Falco slowly, "and now I understand why you

wanted no help, even from the police. I'm sorry your deal didn't go through, but if you can talk your way out of it, you still have your big bust." He held up a hand, palm out. "Don't bother to try to explain. At least I have the satisfaction of repaying him for bashing me in the head this morning."

For the second time that day, he walked away as a police car pulled up to the curb.

The story was buried in the metropolitan section of the morning paper, two inches of type with a small headline in the roundup of minor news at the bottom of page two.

HOLDUP SUSPECT FALLS FOR FAKE DEAL

Falco sipped his morning coffee. She'd pulled it off, but then she really couldn't lose. If she sold the necklace, she had the money. If the deal went sour, she had Muscles.

He stared into his cup. Damn. She seemed to have so much going for her. She didn't need any rotten deals.

He flipped to the classified section. If he didn't find something within two weeks, he'd be dishing out hamburgers in a fast food place or greasing cars in a quick lube.

The ad appeared from under-

neath his sliding forefinger.

UNIDENTIFIED PASSERBY. *For small security agency. Must be six feet tall, weigh approx. 165 lbs., possess great leaping ability. Master's in English literature required.*

She'd narrowed it down pretty well but why? What could she want from him?

Twenty-four hours ago he hadn't known she existed, but since he'd met her, he'd had a gun shoved in his face twice, been hit on the head, and had a muscled madman take a shot at him, none of which could conceivably have made him a better person or put him on anyone's must-know list.

Still, she'd spent the money for the ad and he wouldn't want to see it wasted. He reached for his phone and punched out the number.

"O'Brien Agency."

"I'd like to know more about the position you're offering."

There was a slight pause.

"Something for a beginner. Low salary but a great deal of potential. One of the essential qualifications is the ability not to leap to conclusions."

"I only consider the facts, ma'am. How's your shoulder?"

"Fine. The facts, you lunkhead, are that the necklace *was* in the safe and what you saw was an imitation. Do you think I'd have taken the real thing to

show when he asked to see the merchandise with the possibility of losing it, which almost happened? Where did you learn to jump like that?"

"The annotated volumes of Shakespeare were always on the top shelf and the library didn't have a ladder. Your explanation sounds quite reasonable and I appreciate your thinking it was necessary. Perhaps we'll break up another holdup someday. Nice talking to you—"

"Hold it, Unidentified. Aren't you interested in the job?"

"I thought all you wanted to do was explain."

"Leaping to conclusions again. Are you interested or not?"

Falco thought of drowning in that sea of computer screens, even temporarily, and perhaps someday standing before a class, his hair touched with gray, trying to interest a small group of bright and shining faces, most of whom wouldn't have the faintest idea of what he was talking about, in the joy and complexities of stringing together written words. And he

thought of that brief gut-tightening moment of fear charging toward Muscles when the gun came up and he didn't know if he'd live or die, and the exhilaration of seeing Muscles slump to the ground and knowing she was safe.

If he didn't want to go through that again, he'd better hang up.

"I might be." He cleared his throat. "What sort of benefits go with the job?"

"Those can only be discussed in person, Mr.—?"

The smile in her voice did it. "Weaver. Falco Weaver."

"Good Lord. I think I prefer Unidentified Passerby. Where *did* you learn to jump like that?"

"Four years on the track and field team. I'll be there in an hour, but don't panic if I'm late. The people who run the trains always make sure the one I'm on breaks down."

He cradled the phone. Someday he might feel like suing them over that.

On the other hand, he might feel like sending them the biggest thank-you card they'd ever seen.

FICTION

The Prince of Plumbing

by Linda Haldeman



Illustration by Patrick Welsh

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The kitchen drain made a most remarkable noise—a terrible noise, an abominable noise Fred would have claimed, had his vocabulary included words like “abominable.” The plumbing was old, of course; all the plumbing in this old house was old, and most of the drains were variously vocal. But the kitchen drain had a voice all its own, *basso profundo fortissimo*, something like the roar of a charging lion sucked in rather than proclaimed forth, a bull bellowing backwards.

“Do something about that drain, will you, Ethel?” Fred called *mezzo forte* from the living room where he was watching the evening news, switching from network to network with the remote control button.

“Any suggestions?” Ethel asked, smiling into the clearing drain. She liked the noise the kitchen drain made. It reminded her of the seashore, which she loved. To her it sounded like the backwash of great waves, mysterious and slightly awesome in the dark. It was in some poem she had read in her girlhood, something about a “melancholy long withdrawing roar.” It had meant something more than waves, but she couldn’t remember what.

“Get a plumber,” Fred shouted, switching to *Enter-*

tainment Tonight to see if there were any busty blonde actresses on. No luck, just skinny beanpoles with stringy hair and political positions. The sports channel had soccer, little boys in shorts hitting a round ball with their round heads and round knees.

Ethel came into the living room and sat on the sofa beside him.

“Have you priced plumbers lately? They charge fifty dollars to answer the phone. It’s not in my allowance.”

Fred grunted and switched channels, hunting amusing commercials. They were often better than the shows.

“Here you are,” he exclaimed suddenly. “Look at this. He don’t charge no fifty dollars.”

The commercial and the product it advertised were new to Ethel. In vibrant color a gentleman wearing a scarlet and white bikini, a beautifully built middle-aged gentleman, white haired and ruggedly handsome, his brief costume set off by a white collar and black bow tie and a straw boater hat, spun nonchalantly around a gentle whirlpool on a windsurfer with a scarlet and white sail.

“Ladies,” said a debonair voiceover, “do not despair. Put yourself and your sluggish drain in the hands of the Prince of

Plumbing, the Lancelot of the Lavatory. Don't let your drain put you in a spin when the all-liquid Prince of Plumbing can promise you smooth sailing at a bargain price."

And the charming gentleman in the remarkable costume saluted the spinning stars with a messianic stretch of his white gloved hand and sailed off on a smooth ocean into a red and white sunset.

"I like that," Ethel murmured.

"Yeah, it might work. I'll pick you up a bottle."

Ethel sighed. "As you like. I haven't had any luck with these things before. It was the commercial I liked. Made me think of the ocean and all. Remember how we used to go to the beach every summer years ago? I always loved the shore. Maybe we could take our vacation at Hatteras this year. You could fish; I could collect shells on the beach. How about it?"

She grasped for his hand, an unfamiliar and blatantly dishonest gesture. He, more honestly, drew his away.

"I'm taking my vacation in November, Toots. Me and some of the guys from the plant are gonna get a jump on the deer season. Bud Henning's brother's got a cabin in the woods up north of here."

"Well, if you get anything,

bring it back cleaned and dressed. I'm not messing around with any bloody carcasses."

She got up and returned to the kitchen to wipe the dishes.

"If you want to go to the beach this summer, why don't you save some money from your allowance? Go easy on the shopping sprees and the beauty parlor."

Ethel did not dignify that generous suggestion with a reply, satisfying her rage with a few strong oaths under her breath. She stood leaning on the sink automatically wiping flatware, staring into the open drain. "I could kill him," she whispered into the drain, "I could just kill him."

From the living room came Fred's belly deep laughter.

"Hey, Toots, bring me a brew and come watch these idiots on *Hollywood Squares*."

Ethel sighed, pulled two cans of light beer from the refrigerator, and joined her husband on the sofa, dreaming of the seashore and the roaring ocean and the Prince of Plumbing on his windsurfer. Other wives had done it, and a few had gotten away with it. There before him on the screen was Fred's favorite image, a bosomy blonde who wallowed in her childishness. Secretly Ethel hoped the drain commercial would come on again.

Ethel's hairdresser and professional mother confessor was named Dawn. She was everything a good hairdresser and mother confessor ought to be—tough as her constantly sun-abused skin and multi-dyed hair (bright red at the moment), full of sensible advice, and unfailingly discreet. While submitting to the customary shampoo and set and blue rinse as discreet as Dawn herself, Ethel spoke of matters she revealed to no one else, sometimes even to herself.

The subject of the thwarted trip to the shore arose.

"I could kill him," Ethel murmured through clenched teeth. "I've thought about it, seriously, how I could get away with it. There are lots of guns in the house, but he keeps them locked away. Hunting and fishing are not proper activities for women. If they don't shoot their feet, they get fishhooks caught in their fingers. Oh well, anyhow I'm too soft. I couldn't bring myself to do violence to any living creature, even Fred."

"Besides," Dawn countered, "killing Fred would not be the wisest solution. What you need is to get a job so you can take your own vacation."

"My dear, you don't know Fred. I think he would prefer to be killed. You see, I was working as a checker at the Safeway

and doing quite well when Fred showed up to take me away from all that. I hadn't known before he came that I wanted to be taken away. It was glamorous at first, getting married in a white gown and honeymooning in a cabin in the woods. No hunting that trip. A nice little house to take care of, learning to cook, all that *Ladies' Home Journal* stuff. Then the honeymoon was over. Dinner became a chore, then Fred began demanding it and noticing dust on the furniture. I applied for a job at the Safeway, and Fred exploded. What would the guys think, not to mention the neighbors? That he couldn't afford to keep a woman properly? No wife of his is going to work. He took me away from that, and he's making sure I stay away." Dawn clasped in the last roller and led Ethel to an empty dryer.

"The way I see it, love," she said as she lowered the cap, "you've got yourself into something of a pickle. You're going to have to dispose of this Fred or stand up to him."

"Or run away."

Dawn's answer to that was drowned by the gust of the blower.

Fred came home from work with a white, plastic bottle decorated with a picture of a handsome,

graying gentleman wearing a red striped bikini, a white collar with black bowtie and a straw boater, riding a whirlpool easily and comfortably on a windsurfer with a red striped sail.

"Here's your Prince of Plumbing, Toots. See what he can do for that roaring drain. What's for supper?"

"Pork chops and mashed potatoes." Ethel examined the white plastic bottle, looking as long as she dared at the man on the surfer before examining the list of active ingredients.

"Just as I thought, it's nothing but lye and perfume. It might clean the drain, but it won't mute the roar."

Ethel stowed the white bottle under the sink and served supper. The dishwasher drained out with the roar of receding waves.

"See?" she called into the living room. "I told you so."

Then she stood staring into the open drain hole listening to the roar.

It started out as a quiet evening. Fred read the sports page. Ethel scoured the "help wanted" classifieds, making marks with a pencil. Fred glanced over, and the quiet evening was shattered.

"Whatcha doing, Toots?"

Ethel took a deep breath and worked at being offhand.

"Looking for a job."

Fred exploded as only an enraged head of the house can. Ethel stood her ground, trying not to shout back.

"I can easily find work. You see, I have marked ten possibilities just tonight. I'm going to the beach whether you want me to or not."

Fred tore the want ads to shreds, knocked Ethel to the floor, and forced the shreds into her mouth.

"No job. My wife doesn't work. No job and no beach. Now get up and get me a beer."

Ethel got up slowly, spitting shreds of paper into the wastebasket. The meat knife, newly sharpened by Fred, who did it properly, lay gleaming in an open kitchen drawer. If ever she had it in her to kill him outright, it would be now. She stroked the knife but knew she couldn't do it. Before she took Fred the beer, she stood for a while staring into the open drain.

"Are you down there, prince? Take me away from all this."

It wasn't, Ethel reminded herself as she weeded her little flower garden in the joy of the spring sunshine, that she was squeamish. After all, what was gardening but selective killing? Some of the joy that she got out of the activity involved the ruthless but legal

uprooting of perfectly healthy blooming dandelions and ground ivy. But they sinned by not submitting to the control of the gardener and so were righteously destroyed. Like all good rebels they regenerated a thousandfold to frustrate the gardener. Ethel smiled benevolently on a robust dandelion shining forth with two sunburst yellow blooms, then dug out the root. How cool to kill in such a spirit, without anger or malice, practically and emotionlessly, like Fred's buddy, who coolly referred to hunting "bunnies." How could a man call the creature a bunny with all the images of Easter and cuddly stuffed toys and perpetually wriggling pink noses, and then shoot it? She could do it to dandelions and even to mice that had the bad judgment to invade her cupboards, but she could not so easily dispose of Fred. Bunnies are not in the habit of shooting each other.

Ethel washed her garden-soiled hands at the kitchen sink.

"You turned out to be no help," she grumbled into the drain. "All I want is to go to the shore, is that asking so much? If you can't help me do that, at least you could settle Fred. I was brought up in another time. I learned to be subject to my father, my husband. I never dared to be my own woman.

You have to be born a dandelion; it doesn't come easy."

The rage that had worked so well against the freewheeling garden intruders now turned against that last image of male recalcitrance.

"All right, prince. If you don't help me I won't help you. How would you like a lye cocktail?"

Carefully averting her eyes from the portrait of the rugged windsurfer on the bottle, Ethel uncapped it and poured the entire contents into the drain, dropping the empty bottle into the wastebasket. The overloaded drain spluttered and groaned like an active volcano. Ethel stood back out of range of any splattering lye, smiling in satisfaction. She had gotten back at somebody, even if it was only an imaginary commercial image intended to seduce housewives like herself into using a household product.

The eruption lasted close to half an hour, then subsided slowly like a receding neap tide.

"Very tidy," Ethel smiled. "Very tidy."

Somewhere in the lower depths of her bedroom drawer was an ancient gold lamé bikini, a whim she had long outgrown. It was still there and not too badly worn. More remarkably, it fit her after all these years and pounds. She didn't

look half bad in it with her hair newly rinsed and set.

Back in the kitchen the tide slowly, quietly continued its journey back to wherever tides go. Ethel stood resting her elbows on the edge of the sink as was her habit, staring into the open hole.

A voice, deep and cavernous yet gentle and elegantly seductive, spoke upward into Ethel's face.

"Come with me. Come with me."

"Who in hell are you?" Ethel responded, too startled to study this remarkable phenomenon. "And where are you going?"

"I am the Prince of Plumbing, of course, released by your charitable rage from imprisonment in that miserable bottle. I am under obligation to grant you your most precious wish. What that is we both already know, do we not? So I grant it in my invitation. I go, of course, where all drains and sewers go, to the sea. Care to join me?"

Ethel leaned as far as she could into the chrome-lined drain hole, her feet dangling in the air.

"Remember Dorothy?" the Prince said. "She clicked her heels and said, 'There's no place like home.'"

Ethel gripped the edge of the sink, took a quick look around her and laughed.

"There's no place like—the sea," she chanted, knocking her bare heels together. "There's no place like the sea, and there's no one like the Prince of Plumbing."

As she began diminishing in size she scrambled over the side into the sink. It smelled of Comet. Whatever they might say about her, she had been a good housekeeper. The drain hole, broad and deep as an open well, beckoned her and repelled her as deep places will. She could not bring herself to jump in but rather climbed in, lowering herself and clinging to the slippery chrome edge until her fingers slipped and she dropped, grappling at the slimy sides of the pipe. Strange creatures, crablike, shrimplike, scorpionlike, centipedelike, all bleached to an unhealthy pale pink, stared curiously with black crustacean eyes at her as she passed.

The mast of the windsurfer very nearly impaled her. She grabbed it and shinnied down, noting with relief that it was aluminum and free of splinters. The Prince of Plumbing stood waiting for her on the narrow deck.

"Welcome aboard." He kissed her, as she rather expected.

The surfer spun slowly around the whirlpool of sinking water. A pause, which she recognized

as the infamous elbow joint, sent them on a brief water-slide ride. The receding water rose upward, and the windsurfer sank and bobbed. Ethel held her breath, thinking of the grease and garbage that was supposed to dwell herein, causing clogs and stench. Fortunately her curiosity forced her to keep her eyes open, and she saw that the water was still remarkably clean. The drain creatures moved about on the surface of the pipe, below and above them, filtering garbage as efficiently as any surface feeder.

The pipe through which they sailed was more comfortably horizontal now, but a rather tight squeeze. The sudden, slightly downward lurch that carried them from this their private tributary into the rushing river of the municipal sewer allowed them much more room but also much more company. The refuse pouring in from other branches seemed less sanitized than hers. For this she might thank her own cleanliness or the efficiency of the Prince. The sucking and sifting creatures in and on the river were much larger and therefore somewhat more fearsome to humans: anemones and urchins clinging to the submerged pipe, and free-swimming filter feeders reminiscent of sharks and minia-

ture baleen whales. The river as it continued became wider and more rapid, the refuse somewhat diluted by the contents of storm drains. But a new relief from the unpleasantness of sewage entered upon the voyagers from ahead. Light at the end of the tunnel and the fresh-acrid odor of the sea.

The little raft with its two clinging passengers rushed to the opening mouth of this man-made, man-polluted river. Ethel, breathless with excitement, was seized by a sudden remembrance of things and obligations past. What about the phone bill, the trash collection, the condition of the garden? Only one of these questions flashing before her memory she articulated.

"What about Fred?"

The Prince chuckled gently. "Ah, yes, Fred. Your second most precious wish, distantly related to the first. The rules by which I live allow me to grant but one wish to my liberator, and I chose that which was closest to your heart, fully realizing that the other would, in the course of events, take care of itself. Two with one swipe, so to speak."

"It's not funny," Ethel pouted, seeing her conscience once more spoiling her fun. "He can't take care of himself. He couldn't heat a frozen dinner. He doesn't

know where his clean underwear is or what to do with it when it gets dirty, or even when it is dirty."

The Prince laughed in unbri-dled merriment.

"Fear not, timid little sand-piper. Fred will be well taken care of: fed, clothed, laundered, sheltered. Here we are at our destination, in the open ocean. Shake off the obligations and dreary chores of the past and enjoy with me."

Ethel sat on the surfer, now large enough to accommodate both of them comfortably, and took a look around. This was indeed the open ocean. Over her shoulder waves broke upon a broad white beach and returned with the beloved melancholy long withdrawing roar. Around the surfer small waves chopped, sending the water on to break against the beach. A log, too young in the water to have been sculpted by wind and waves into interesting driftwood, bobbed by. It was a log-sized log, Ethel noted, realizing she was also human size, as were her companion and their craft.

The Prince laughed again. "Granting wishes is not my only power. Will you join me in a swim before the denizens of the deep lay for us a seafood supper?"

He dived quickly into the

waves. More cautiously and much less gracefully, Ethel slid over the side of the surfer and slipped into the water. She had never learned to dive; maybe she would now.

Fred came home at five thirty as he always did, sometimes earlier, never later, expecting his evening meal to be ready to serve. The first thing he noticed on opening the front door was the absence of familiar cooking odors.

"Hey, Ethel, what's on the stove?"

His voice rang through the empty house. Fred stood puzzled in the center of the abandoned kitchen.

"Ethel, you bitch," he shouted in the general direction of the stairs. "You get your ass down here and make me my supper."

Getting no response, he tried the cellar stairs, but they only echoed his shouted obscenities. He slammed the echoing kitchen wall repeatedly with his fists until it broke through in a shower of plaster. Dishes left stacked clean in the drainer he threw against the undamaged walls. But no Ethel and no supper materialized. Clearing the living room of lamps and bric-a-brac with his flailing hands, Fred bolted up the stairs. All was in place, the bed made, the

shades raised exactly even. She had a suitcase somewhere, old, stained, and damaged. Here it still was under the bed, closed and quite empty.

Only the basement was left. The washer and dryer were heavy, hard to upend, especially since the dryer was still full of clothes. Not like Ethel at all. The rest of the basement contained his hunting and fishing equipment.

"All right, Ethel," he roared louder than the kitchen drain, taking out a shotgun and carefully loading it (he was always careful with firearms). "You've done it this time."

Through the squat basement window he saw a woman's fat thighs in a kneeling position. Hah! She was messing with that silly flower garden. Fred took aim at one of those fleshy thighs and fired.

Josie Kubelik was stooping down, not a pretty sight, pulling the dead blooms from her marigolds and struggling to ignore the racket next door. A good neighbor is one who minds his own business and discusses what he may have inadvertently seen and heard only within the family and among especially discreet friends. She jumped, though, at the loud report coming from behind her and the sharp pain in her thigh. Something vicious had stung

her. She was fleeing to safety on the porch when a second shot just missed her and smashed against the new aluminum siding of her cottage.

Crazy. She had suspected for some time that both of them were crazy. Now she had proof. In the safety of her kitchen she held a paper towel against her bleeding thigh while phoning the police. Through the window she could see Fred running about the yard shouting and waving the shotgun.

Fred was arrested on suspicion of assault and attempted homicide, as well as resisting arrest, assault on a police officer, and terroristic threats. Once he had been removed, handcuffed in the back of a squad car, still struggling and wailing for Ethel, two officers from the Missing Persons Bureau searched the wrecked house thoroughly for clues to Ethel's disappearance. They found none. Fred was of no help. While being led to the magistrate's office for arraignment, he drew toward a drinking fountain. The arresting officers, thinking he was thirsty, allowed him to approach it. But instead of drinking, he bent over the drain and shouted.

"I know you're in there, Ethel. You'll have to come out some time, and I'll be waiting for you."

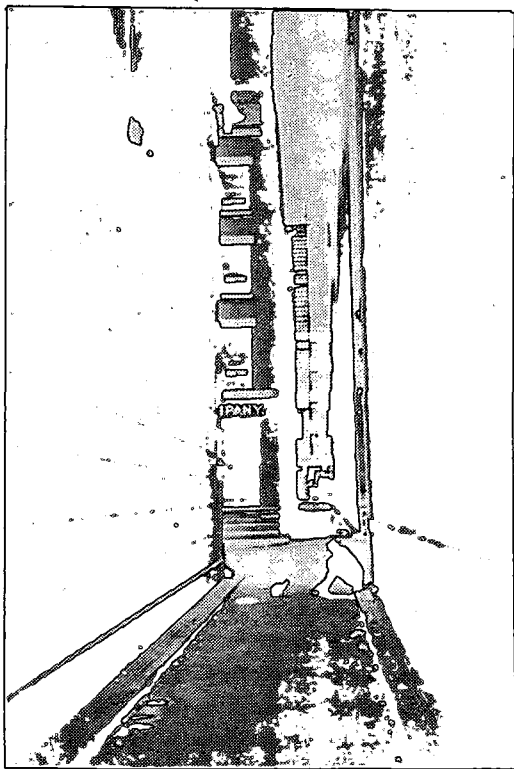
Before his case could come to trial, Fred was declared insane, for his condition deteriorated during his incarceration and he had become a menace to himself and to society. He was placed in a state-approved mental hospital where he was fed, clothed, lodged, and generally cared for. Psychologists talked regularly with him but made no progress and discovered nothing new. He still grimly stuck to his story that his wife had been seduced by some guy in the drain. He was quiet so long as Ethel was not mentioned and he was not left alone in the presence of a sink, and he

seemed comparatively satisfied as he grew old.

No trace was ever found of Ethel. No one had seen her leave the house; none of her clothes or personal effects was missing (not even Fred would have remembered the bikini). After a year had passed, distant relatives of Fred's sold the house and everything in it at auction. The young couple who bought the little house liked it very much (all the good neighbors said nothing of its history), although the young people did complain at times about the noise the kitchen drain made. Replacing the pipes didn't help.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Digby's First Case

by Anne Perry



Illustration by Kurt Wallace

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Freddie Dagliesh sat in bed propped up by pillows while the gas lamp hissed gently in its bracket on the wall. It was essential he stay awake—one could not make an assignation with a woman one liked as much as he liked Daisy Beech, then fail to keep it because one had fallen asleep.

But it was also of the utmost importance he wait until the last of his guests had gone to their rooms and closed the doors for the final time, and the ladies' maids had completed their duties and retired to their own quarters. There were proprieties to be observed. This might be 1894 and all London aswirl with the wit of Oscar Wilde, the antics of the Prince of Wales, and the beauty of Lily Langtry, but only four years ago Charles Stewart Parnell had wrecked his political aspirations on the scandal of his affair with Mrs. O'Shea.

And this was a highly political weekend: within the next few days a decision would be made as to which of three men present would receive an excellent appointment to the Foreign Office—one which could lead to the cabinet, possibly even to Downing Street.

Would it be Andrew Delamain, with his brilliant mind and too frequently unguarded tongue, his wit and his large appetites? He would be a good

choice; his wife Lucy was elegant, accomplished, and well connected. There was something faintly brittle about her that worried Freddie, but perhaps that was merely a matter of taste; he preferred more comfortable women, solid, frank, with quiet humor—like Daisy.

The minister might choose Evan Marshall, volatile, charming, so hard to predict. He was not from quite the ideal background, but of the three of them he probably had the greatest flair for the art of politics, he understood all manner of people, he had instinctive knowledge of both weaknesses and strengths. Pity he was unmarried, but that was something he could remedy any day he chose, probably to a duke's daughter if he wished.

And of course there was Anthony Beech, suave, well-bred, and so very distinguished with his dark hair greying in stylish wings at the temples. He was a decent enough man, and if he were not married to Daisy, Freddie might well have found him agreeable—but he had liked Daisy too long and with too deep an emotion to be fair. Beech was ten years younger than she, barely into his forties, and immeasurably better looking—the kindest one could say of Daisy was that she was "interesting"—but it was Daisy who had the money.

This party needed a hostess, so Freddie had done as he usually did and asked his widowed sister Pamela Selden to stay. Beautiful Pamela—she did it so very well. This time she had brought her daughter with her. Poor Sophie was smitten with Anthony Beech, but perhaps that was natural enough at eighteen, and no doubt it would pass.

And of course there were the Puseys, the archdeacon and his wife. Personally Freddie found them pompous and exceedingly tiresome, but since Mrs. Pusey was the minister's sister, they could hardly be refused hospitality this week, dearly as he would have liked to.

Surely they must all be in their rooms by now? He could hear nothing except the hissing of the gas, no footsteps, no murmured voices. Was it safe?

Somewhere in the house a clock struck midnight. Better not go yet—it was too soon. Leave it another half hour at least. If Daisy were asleep, it could be very pleasant waking her. He had been surprised to discover that weekend at the Walsinghams' what a delicious sense of humor she had. Not that she had much occasion to indulge it, Anthony was such a stuffy beggar, and vain, always admiring himself in mirrors. And ambitious—one could almost taste it when he spoke.

He was so careful in his courtship of those who mattered it made Freddie ache to watch him.

But Daisy was different. He drifted into a pleasant contemplation. She was generous, she was wise, and she had the ability to laugh at the world's eccentricities without unkindness.

Half past midnight. Time to go.

He got up, straightened the sheets a little, then crept to the door and opened it. The corridor was empty, just the faint glow of the night lamps burning. Third room on the right, she had said. First room, linen cupboard, second room—third! He felt a delightful tingle of excitement. Softly he turned the handle and pushed the door open. Silence. He slipped inside and pulled it to. The curtains were drawn; only a thin bar of moonlight showed him the wide, canopied bed.

She must be asleep.

His smile broadened. This would be fun. He took a deep breath and undid the sash of his dressing robe, letting it fall open. It was about three yards to the bed. He made it with a great leap, shouting, "Tally ho!" with a whoop of delight.

"Hell fire!"

Freddie was transfixed. It was a man's voice.

There were tangles of limbs and bodies underneath him. He

moved his hand and felt an enormous bosom, a loose blanch-mange of flesh. Unwittingly his fingers closed on it in a spasm of horror.

"How dare you!" Mrs. Pusey's voice throbbed through the darkness with outrage.

Freddie snatched his hand away. The archdeacon's round belly was under his knees, there seemed to be legs everywhere. A sweat of horror broke out all over his body.

If he said nothing, perhaps they would never know who he was? He would lie—say he had not even woken all night. Please God? He must get out, find the door and escape. This was worse than the worst nightmare imaginable.

He made a mighty heave and fell onto the floor on the far side of the bed next to the window, dragging the counterpane with him, suffocating and entangling. There was a shriek from the bed. In blind panic he fought the counterpane, kicking and thrashing. His foot struck the chamber pot with a clang. At last he was free. On hands and knees he scrambled round the end of the bed and across the floor. He reached up for the door knob, and a moment later was outside in the corridor, gasping for breath, shaking like an aspen.

He could not stay here. The archdeacon would be out at any

moment to look for him. It would be unbearable. No excuse in the world would do. And when the minister heard of it, it would be disaster.

He straightened up and walked smartly back the way he had come, past the table and the flowers; one door, two, the linen cupboard, his own room . . . thank heaven! Once he was inside he would be safe. The archdeacon, like everyone else, thought this was Pamela's room; he would never presume to waken her.

He pulled on the handle, swung it open, and slid into sanctuary, a prayer of relief on his lips.

He needed a drink. Ridgeway was a pompous blighter, but he was an immaculate butler, he would have seen to it that a tray was left—a tot of brandy might help and it could not hurt. Turn the gas up—see what he was doing.

It took only a moment, then the soft glow filled the room. Where was that tray? He turned to look.

It was incredible! There was Daisy in the bed, waiting for him, her hair spread out on the pillow. How could they have misunderstood each other so disastrously?

He dimmed the light, slipped off his robe, and climbed back into the bed. He reached out to take hold of her. Her body was

warm and firm, just as he remembered it. He held her closely, gently; but she did not respond.

"Daisy!" She could not possibly be asleep so soon. "Daisy!"

Still she did not move. He sat up and pulled her sharply. Her head fell back, her eyes closed.

"Daisy!" Suddenly there was panic in him. It was impossible—wasn't it? "Daisy!" He shook her, then again violently.

She was unconscious. What in heaven's name was he going to do?

He could not leave her here, nor could he manage to carry her back to her own room—he did not even know which one it was. The memory of Mrs. Pusey brought the sweat out on his skin again. He could feel hysteria beating its way up inside him, ready to explode.

He must call someone. If Daisy were ill he must get her help, quickly. But who? Who was there who would not go off into a barrage of idiotic questions rather than dealing with the problem?

Dealing with it! He had another man's wife lying unconscious in his bed! How could anyone deal with that?

"Oh God!" he howled desperately. "Oh God, help me!" He covered his face with his hands. He was ready to weep. Perhaps he had had too much brandy after dinner and this was all an

abominable hallucination? Please—please, that was it!

No. He looked through his fingers and she was still there, her face mottled red. She had not moved at all.

He was shaking all over as if he were in an icy wind, but it was a hot summer night.

This was useless. He must help her.

Pamela—Pamela would come! She would help Daisy first—if she wanted to lecture him on his wits or his morals, she would do it after. At least he was sure where Pamela was—in his room in the west wing.

He went out again and almost ran along the corridor. He knocked very sharply and, when there was no immediate answer, rattled the knob.

A moment later Pamela appeared, dressing robe thrown around her shoulders.

"Freddie! What's happened? Is the house on fire?"

He realized suddenly that he had been banging on the door almost as if he would force it, and that he still had nothing on but his nightshirt.

"Something awful has happened!" he gasped. "You've got to help me. Daisy Beech is ill—in a coma—I can't rouse her—"

Pamela's eyebrows shot up. "You can't rouse her?" she repeated incredulously.

Freddie felt sick with misery.

"Pamela, for God's sake help me. She's ill—in my bed."

"Oh Freddie, for—" Then her outrage dissolved as she recognized the fear in his voice even though she could not see his face against the light. "Of course. You'd better stay here. I'll get Digby." She went back into the room, turned up the gas and lit it, then rang the maid's bell. Freddie followed her in and sat down sharply in the dressing chair, his legs weak.

Five minutes later Pamela was outside on the landing with her lady's maid, a middle-aged, stocky woman of immense common sense.

"Digby, we have a problem," Pamela said frankly. She trusted Digby more than anyone else in the world. "Lady Beech has been taken ill—in Mr. Dagliesh's bed."

Digby's wispy eyebrows rose over her round grey eyes, but her Yorkshire voice remained perfectly calm. "Indeed, ma'am, then we had better help the poor lady."

Pamela led the way, tiptoeing along the passage. At the bedroom door she pushed it open gently, beckoned Digby in, closed it, and turned the key. Inside, the gas lamps still burned dimly, winking in the brandy decanter and the glass. Daisy Beech was lying motionless and red-faced between the rumpled sheets.

Pamela walked over to the bed. She looked at Daisy, then put the backs of her fingers gently on the vein in her neck and waited for a moment.

"Is there a mirror on the dresser, Digby?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," Digby answered. "I'll get the brandy glass." She picked it up and polished it before passing it.

Pamela put the smooth barrel of the glass in front of Daisy's mouth, then held it up and examined it. There was no shadow of breath clouding it.

"She's dead," Pamela said very softly, her mouth dry. She turned to look at Digby. "She must have had a stroke or something."

"Then there is nothing more we can do for the poor creature," Digby replied with a little shake of her head.

"Except keep her reputation." Pamela looked where Daisy was lying, one arm spread wide, her silk nightgown open at the neck, embroidered in white thread. It was beautiful, but hardly modest. "And Freddie's," she added. "We'll have to get her back to her own room. Can you take her feet if I take her shoulders?"

Digby let out her breath in a sharp little sigh, but she did not argue. She had been in service to the Quality since she was fourteen, and she had seen many unusual events, although this

was unique even for her. Obediently she retied the sash of her robe a little more firmly and moved up to the bed. "I think we had better take her in the sheet, ma'am," she suggested practically. "For decency's sake." As she spoke she folded Daisy's arms gently and pulled the linen over her and round, covering her face and shoulders.

"Just a moment!" Pamela whispered fiercely. "I'm going out to turn off the lamps in the corridors. I'd far rather risk stumbling in the dark than meeting anyone and trying to explain this to them."

"Who would we meet?" Digby hissed back.

"I don't know. Anyone. Someone else might be—visiting. Or have heard us." She slipped out of the door, and a moment later the passageway outside dimmed, and then went totally dark. She came back into the room and hurried over to the bed. Together, very awkwardly because Daisy was a big woman, they eased her off the bed, carefully wound in the sheet, then onto the floor, and with intense effort, gradually, step by step, catching their feet in the trailing drapes, they moved across the room, out into the corridor. Breathing heavily, whispering warnings and imprecations at each other and the night in general, they made their way along

the passage. Once Pamela stood on the sheet and all but pitched over. Digby stifled a squeal of horror.

At the corner they bumped into a wall and nearly collapsed. Daisy was incredibly awkward; she seemed to have a passion to fold up in the middle and sit down. Digby's arms ached with the effort of holding her, and Pamela was groaning as she struggled to hang onto Daisy's shoulders.

Only a few yards more to go.

Then they froze. Horror prickled on Digby's scalp and she felt all her hair rise. There was someone else in the corridor, someone creeping.

Pamela's breath came out in a sigh close to her ear.

They waited. Seconds ticked by. Pamela pulled at Digby's sleeve. They must move before the other person found the light on the wall at the corner and re-lit it.

Slowly they began again: a yard, another yard. Pamela caught her feet in the trailing sheet, swayed, stubbed her toe on a table leg—and bit her lip to prevent herself from swearing.

Then just as the corridor lamp burned up, Digby closed the door and they were alone in Daisy's room. They staggered over to the bed and heaved her onto it; then Pamela drew the covers over her and they both

sank to their knees on the floor.

"Now what?" Pamela said hopelessly. "What on earth are we going to tell Anthony Beech?"

There was silence for a moment. Indeed the question was not as easy as either of them had assumed.

"That poor Lady Beech is dead," Digby replied at last. "Although how we account for the fact that we discovered her, I cannot imagine."

"We have to tell him," Pamela said reluctantly. "We can't just leave her here."

Digby's plain, northern common sense asserted itself. "We'll have to do that, ma'am. There's nothing we can do for her except keep our discretion. It won't be Sir Anthony who finds her, it'll be Croft, her maid who came with her, bringing in her tea in the morning."

"Couldn't you?" Pamela asked hopefully. "It would be—"

"I dare say I can find a way—" Digby could not promise. She climbed to her feet slowly, legs shaking. "But we'd better take that sheet back."

"What? Oh!" Pamela gazed at the extra sheet, still half under Daisy. "Damnation! That would have taken some explaining."

With another awkward effort they managed to extricate the sheet and lay Daisy in a fairly natural position, covered by the quilt, then turned the light out

and crept back, feeling their way along the wall this time, to Freddie's room to replace the sheet, and finally back to their own beds; Digby to the servants' quarters, Pamela to the west wing where Freddie was waiting, ashen-faced.

"I'm awfully sorry, Freddie—I'm afraid she's dead. We put her back in her own room," she said, sitting down wearily. "We'll get the doctor in the morning, but there's nothing he can do."

"We can't get the doctor till Tuesday," Freddie replied. "He's gone away for the weekend."

"How did it happen?" She looked up at him. "Was it a stroke?"

"I don't know, I—" He stared at her, his eyes hot and unhappy, but still not a shred of color in his face. "I came back and found her like that."

"You what?"

"I—I went to her room—and—and somehow we missed each other. When I got back to my own room, Daisy was there—like that."

"Oh." Pamela stood up. "Well, you'd better go back to bed, and in the morning just pretend you know nothing about it. It's the kindest thing you can do for Daisy now."

"I'd rather—" he looked wretched—"I'd rather not go back—"

She touched him gently. She

had not realized he was so truly fond of Daisy Beech. "Then go to the library and sleep on the couch. I'll see you in the morning."

"Thank you, Pamela," he touched her gently, briefly.

Pamela slept little and was already awake when Digby came in at half past seven with a hot cup of tea. She put it down on the bedside table and drew the curtains before saying rather self-consciously, "I'm extremely sorry to tell you, ma'am, that Lady Beech passed away during the night. I have told her maid, Croft, but I thought perhaps you would prefer to tell Sir Anthony yourself. I'm afraid Mr. Dagliesh is not at all well this morning."

"Thank you, Digby." Pamela met her eyes and smiled weakly. She took the tea and sipped it, and began to feel as if perhaps she could cope.

Digby's face was anxious, but there was a familiarity about it that was reassuring.

"Yes," Pamela agreed. "I'll tell Sir Anthony. You'd better get out something black—or grey at least."

"Yes, ma'am, I already did, the grey silk. You won't be wanting a bath this morning?"

"No, thank you, there isn't time."

Pamela was barely dressed

and Digby was putting up her hair when there was a knock on the door and Sophie came in. She was just seventeen, slender and pretty, but her charm lay in her coloring and her expression; she would never be the beauty her mother was.

"Good morning, Mama," she said cheerfully. "Is it all right if I go for a carriage ride this morning? I thought I should like to call on the Misses Burridge at the Grange."

"No—no, I'm afraid not." Pamela handed hairpins to Digby. "Lady Beech passed away during the night."

"Oh!" Sophie sat down suddenly on the bed. "Oh, how awful! Poor Sir Anthony! I—"

Pamela turned round, looking at her daughter more closely. She was perfectly aware that for some time past Sophie had cherished a yearning admiration for Anthony Beech, but she had hoped it would run its course and be replaced by something more suitable. Now Daisy's death made Beech an even more romantic figure, and she could see it already in Sophie's young face and wide eyes.

"I think you should respect his privacy this morning," Pamela said. "It is not kind to intrude upon people's moments of grief, especially a man's. He will want to present a dignified appearance, particularly now when he is seeking high office."

Give him time to compose himself, my dear."

"Oh." Sophie looked crestfallen. She had been about to rush forward with gentleness and sympathy, but she realized the wisdom of Pamela's guidance. "Yes, I suppose so. How terrible—I didn't even know she was ill, although of course we all knew she was so much older than he—"

"She was only fifty-three," Pamela said tartly. "Now go and change into something plain."

Sophie went out, and, now that her hair was finished, Pamela thanked Digby and prepared herself to tell Anthony Beech his wife was dead.

She found him in his room, standing in front of the mirror adjusting his tie.

"Good morning, Mrs. Selden," he said, raising his eyebrows a little, but he was too well-mannered, too careful, to show outright surprise.

She closed the door. "I am afraid it isn't a good morning, Anthony. I have some very bad news for you—I am extremely sorry—Daisy passed away during the night."

"What?" He stood uncomprehendingly, blank-faced.

"Daisy passed away during the night," she repeated. "I think it may have been a stroke—" She wanted to say something

about its being sudden, but he would wonder how she knew that and explanation was impossible. "I'm so sorry. I expect you'd like to be alone for a while—I'll send Ridgeway with tea or a brandy, if you'd prefer. I'll see that everything is done to help, and please ask for anything you wish."

"Daisy—gone?" He was very pale. He looked elegant, polished—and empty. "Dear God, how awful! She can't—"

"I am afraid there is no doubt."

He sat down slowly and put his head in his hands, closing her out. There was nothing for Pamela to do but retreat quietly and seek Ridgeway to tell him of affairs and send him to do what he could. The rest of the household would have to get on by itself.

Breakfast was ghastly. Andrew Delamain was the first one down and was busy at the sideboard helping himself to deviled kidneys, bacon, sausages, and eggs when Pamela came into the dining room. His first reaction was one of pleasure. His eyes lit up and he was about to speak when he saw the pallor of her face, the shadows and the tensions around her throat. His concern was immediate and genuine.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you, but I'm afraid Daisy Beech died during

the night." She did not use any euphemism. Delamain was one of the few people with whom pretense was unnecessary; it was the quality in him she liked most.

"I'm sorry." He looked shocked. He put his hand out and clasped her arm in an instinctive gesture of compassion.

The door opened again and Lucy Delamain came in, fair, elegant, and fragile. Instantly her eyes flew to Delamain's hand, and her face tightened with the memory of other glances, laughter shared, and hot, bright moments observed and cut off. "Good morning, Mrs. Selden," she said icily, her voice thick with emotion. "You don't look well."

"Daisy Beech died in the night," Delamain said abruptly.

Lucy winced at the uncouthness of expression. One did not die, one passed away, or was taken. "I'm sorry," she said aloud. "Poor Anthony must be very distressed."

"Naturally," Pamela replied. "So are we."

The dining room door swung open and Archdeacon Pusey stood in the entrance, red-cheeked, his hair in grey, startled tufts round his ears, his eyes glaring.

"Mrs. Selden!" he said with quivering voice. "I do not know where Mr. Dagliesh is—he ap-

pears not to have arisen yet—so I must make my complaint to you. I apologize for the gross indelicacy, but I am left no choice. Mrs. Pusey and I have been unpardonably insulted. Only my duty to the minister, and to my country, compels me to remain under your roof an hour longer. But you may be sure it will not be forgotten."

Pamela was bewildered, and found the whole thing both ridiculous and irrelevant. Daisy Beech was dead; what could an ill-chosen or tasteless remark matter? She tried to find something soothing to say, but nothing came.

Delamain's hand tightened on her arm, steadying her.

"Lady Beech passed away in the night," he said crisply. "I think you would be more use comforting Sir Anthony than cherishing your grievances, whatever they may be."

The archdeacon's face blanched first with outrage at being spoken to in such a manner, then with shock as the comprehension of death reached him.

Evan Marshall appeared in the doorway behind him, his mercurial face full of sympathy.

"Did you say Lady Beech passed away in the night?" he asked quietly. "I'm extremely sorry, she was a charming woman—we shall all miss her."

Upstairs Digby offered her help to Croft, Daisy Beech's maid. Laying out the dead was a grim business, and natural compassion for a woman obviously badly shaken and frightened for her own now uncertain future prompted her to offer her assistance.

They were halfway through the sad but necessary offices when suddenly Croft stopped, her body motionless, her face even more pallid than usual. Digby was afraid she was going to faint.

"Sit down!" she commanded. "Sit down and put your head forward—I'll finish."

But Croft did not move. "You don't understand," she said hoarsely. She held up Daisy's dead hand.

Digby stared at it; it was smooth and soft, fingers tapered, by far the loveliest feature of an otherwise plain woman, except that today there were three fingernails torn off, leaving rough, ugly edges.

"They weren't like that last night," Croft said almost under her breath. "I'll swear to that. I buffed them and filed them for her. And she'd never have gone to bed with them all tore like that, even if she'd had an accident—she'd have called me—or even done them herself."

"Well, they *are* torn," Digby said.

"Then someone else did it."

Croft would not be moved. Her face was set hard, and as white as whey. "She fought with someone."

Digby opened her mouth to say "Nonsense!" but the word died on her lips. "Well, let's see if we can find the torn nails," she said instead. She was certainly not going to tell Croft that Daisy had died somewhere else. She looked more closely at the hand, then at the other. There was dried blood thick under two of the nails.

Together they searched all the bedding and round the floor, but found no torn nails.

"I think you had better have a hot cup of tea," Digby suggested, her mind racing. "Who on earth would want to—to fight with Lady Beech?"

"Whoever killed her," Croft said breathlessly. "Oh, Gawd help us!"

"Sit down," Digby ordered. "I'll get you the tea—and we'll think about this, and what's to be done."

Outside in the corridor she was overwhelmed. Murder! The scandal would be appalling. They would never recover. The very first thing she must do was stop Croft spreading it all over the place or the whole house would be in an uproar. She would put a good stiff dose of laudanum in her tea; that should take care of this morning at least.

But by the time she had got back to Daisy's bedroom, the upstairs maid had been in, and even though she managed to persuade Croft to take to her bed and remain there, the damage was begun.

Could it be true? She must be sure. She went back to the room where Pamela had called her in the middle of the night. It was empty, Freddie had refused to come back to it. Inside she closed the door and walked over to the bed. It took her five minutes before she found two of the ragged nails. Then, breathless, her heart beating in her ears, she stood up and pushed her hair with a shaking hand. She looked at the bed. Daisy Beech had been murdered here sometime last night, between Freddie Dagliesh's leaving it and his coming back. By whom? And why?

She stared at it. There was something wrong with the bed apart from the top sheet's being in a tangle where Pamela had thrown it—but what? It was not as a bed should be . . . pillows! That was it—there was a pillow missing! Was it torn where Daisy had scabbled at it as it lay pressed over her face? Was there blood on it? There must be something—some reason why the murderer had removed it rather than simply leaving it where it belonged.

This was too much to manage

alone. She must find an ally.

Without any very clear idea, she went downstairs to the kitchen, locking the bedroom door behind her.

In the main kitchen two scullery maids were struggling with piles of vegetables, the pastry cook was waving her hands in the air, scattering flour all over the place, another maid wept, a fourth slopped around with a wet mop regardless of them all. And Mrs. Jenkins, the cook, sleeves rolled up, was shouting at anyone and everyone.

Ridgeway appeared in the doorway at the far side of the room, magnificent in regal black, his cravat tied immaculately, his face wearing an expression of monumentally affronted dignity.

"May I ask what the trouble is, Mrs. Jenkins?" he said in a pained voice.

"Trouble?" she shrieked, flinging her hands up and inadvertently hurling half a dozen slices of cucumber into the air.

"If the garden produce is unsatisfactory, I suggest you inform the outside staff and send for more," Ridgeway said coldly. "I am sure there will be another cucumber ready in the glass house, if you ask the appropriate person."

Her mouth fell open; then, with a mighty effort, she collected her wits.

"There's been a terrible death

in the house an' I've got maids sniffing around in 'ere," she said furiously, "scared half senseless by stupid talk. Rosie took to her bed with the gripe, a houseparty upstairs is expecting to be fed like royalty, and somebody's talking about murder! Murder, indeed! And me with a headache like a tin bucket. And you standing there as if you've nothing to do in the world but ask me fool questions 'bout a cucumber! That's what's the matter, Mr. Ridgeway."

"You threw the cucumber before I mentioned it, Mrs. Jenkins," he pointed out stiffly. "I shall attend to the housemaids; however, the kitchen staff are your concern. I suggest you find sufficient work to occupy them so they have no time left over to speculate on the affairs of their betters."

He looked at the pastry cook with an icy eye. "And, madam, you are spreading flour over half the kitchen, which I can hardly believe is constructive in the preparation of luncheon. If you have nothing of your own to attend to, I am sure something can be found."

Mrs. Jenkins swelled up in indignation. "As you remarked, Mr. Ridgeway, the kitchen staff are my concern. I will thank you to leave their discipline to me and get back to your own responsibilities. What do you want in my kitchen anyway?"

"A glass of milk and a raw egg," he said. "I might suggest the same thing for your own headache."

One of the girls giggled and scurried away with a pan in her hands, head bent to hide her face.

Mrs. Jenkins snorted. The pastry cook took herself off, and Ridgeway began to prepare his egg and milk and put it on a tray to take up to Freddie.

Digby was in a turmoil. There was something even more urgent in her mind than preventing a ruinous scandal. Since Daisy Beech had been murdered in the dark, while lying in Pamela's bed, it was a hideous but quite possible fact that the murderer may have mistaken his victim and that it was Pamela he had intended. And might still intend.

She went to Pamela's room. There were duties which still had to be done, and it gave her the opportunity to be alone to think. Beginning to tidy up, she came upon a copy of the *Strand* magazine. She knew from a previous comment that Pamela had borrowed it from Ridgeway. It fell open where it had last been read—to a story by Conan Doyle about a highly peculiar person by the name of Sherlock Holmes, a private detective. She sat on the bed in

the sun for a full twenty minutes reading it. It was a most unsuitable subject for a lady—but it really was most absorbing! What a remarkably brilliant man, such perception, and such courage. Of course Dr. Watson was not nearly so clever but he was totally loyal.

Then quite suddenly she had an idea, indeed a stroke that was so dazzling it quite stunned her. She folded the magazine, took a final glance round the room to make sure it was satisfactory, and hurried downstairs.

Ridgeway was in his pantry. She closed the door behind her and stood with her back to it.

"Mr. Ridgeway, I have something which I believe I should return to you, and perhaps I might seek a moment or two of your time. There is a concern upon which you might advise me, it is most serious—"

"Certainly, Miss Digby. How may I be of assistance?" He indicated a chair, then parted his coattails and sat down himself, his face courteously expectant.

She held out the magazine. "I believe this may be yours, Mr. Ridgeway."

"Indeed." He took it with a faint touch of pink in his cheeks. He thought to deny it, then caught Digby's eye and discarded the idea.

Digby looked back at him. There was no time for personal

feelings now; there was most pressing business to be done. Briefly and simply she told him everything that had happened from the time Pamela had rung for her in the night, right up to her one dreadful conclusion that there had been murder done—and might yet be done again.

"Mr. Ridgeway, it seems to me that the methods employed by Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson invariably produce success. I regret that beyond question a reasonable person must conclude that there has been a murder in this house, and whoever is responsible is still here. I believe it is our duty to discover who this person is before there is a scandal which will ruin Mr. Dagliesh and may even lead to another death."

"Miss Digby!" He was almost bereft of speech. His face had lost all its color and remained ash-white for an instant; then, as his mind grasped the enormity of what she had said—and that they should bend their minds to solving it—he blushed cherry red.

"Miss Digby! You are a woman of—of great perception. I can see that you are perfectly right. We must assemble our facts and use our deductive powers. I have read every story of Mr. Sherlock Holmes to date—I believe I am familiar with his methods. If you will be

so good, you may be my Watson." He was conferring an immeasurable privilege upon her—a mere woman.

She had no intention of being his Watson; she intended to be Holmes, and he to be her Watson. But it would be impolitic to say so.

"Thank you," she forced herself to reply demurely. "Now we had better put in order all the facts we know—those which are indubitable. Have you a piece of paper?"

Ridgeway fished for a notebook out of his pocket, and a pen. Digby began immediately.

"We may imagine that whoever it was did not stop to light the gas, so the crime was committed by whatever little moonlight came through the curtains."

"Is that important?" Ridgeway did not write it down.

"Yes, of course it is!" Digby said impatiently. "Since it was Mrs. Selden's room, and as far as I know, no one knew of the change except Mrs. Selden herself, Mr. Dagliesh, and, we must presume, Lady Beech." She colored faintly pink at the necessity of discussing such a thing, but circumstances left her no alternative. Her mother had always said that curiosity was a characteristic of the vulgar, but how else could one detect?

Ridgeway wrote something in a meticulous hand. "Do we

know that beyond doubt?" he asked. "If we do, then we must assume—" he stopped and cleared his throat "—we must assume the impossible."

"Impossible?" Digby raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes says—"

"I know what he says," Ridgeway interrupted quickly. "When we have eliminated the impossible, whatever is left, however unlikely, must be the truth. So either Mrs. Selden was the intended victim, or someone else knew of the change." He smiled with some satisfaction at Digby's puzzled look. "We cannot believe that Mr. Dagliesh killed Lady Beech in his own bed. Or that Mrs. Selden did, in her brother's bed, and chose to help conceal it in such a way. And certainly not that Lady Beech killed herself."

Digby was furious with herself for not having followed through the logic of it—it was not a promising beginning. It made her sound exactly like Dr. Watson at his most typical.

"Indeed," she said dryly. "So someone else knew, either beforehand or else saw Lady Beech in the corridor and followed her to take his chance."

"Precisely. We have no evidence as to opportunity." Ridgeway wrote it down. "The means appears, from what you say, to have been a pillow, which we have not yet found.

You might instigate a search for it, Miss Digby. Speak to the upstairs maids. It might be helpful if we were to discover where it is, although of course it may have been deliberately left somewhere to lay a false trail."

"We are left with motive," Digby finished the summary for him. "We must consider crimes of gain, or fear, or—" she hesitated and cleared her throat—"or passion."

Ridgeway kept his eyes on his pencil. "Only Miss Sophie would gain from Mrs. Selden's death, and that is something we do not need to consider. Lady Beech's death, however, is quite a different matter. It is commonly known that she was a lady of considerable wealth; indeed the unkind have suggested—" He did not complete the thought, the implication was obvious.

Digby was less squeamish. "But Sir Anthony had the use of it," she pointed out. "He always has had; his style of living is witness of that."

"Perhaps he had debts that Lady Beech would not settle for him," Ridgeway suggested. "Gentlemen sometimes gamble, or even—" He looked up at Digby's round eyes and homely face. "They have even been known to run establishments for other women, which may be a considerable expense. Lady

Beech would certainly not have countenanced that—especially when Sir Anthony is in strong contention for such an important position."

Digby shook her head. "He is a most ambitious man," she said with conviction. "I don't believe it is in his character to keep a mistress at such a time—it is far too great a risk. But I suppose it is possible he may have fallen in love and wished to marry someone else, which would not be possible with Lady Beech alive."

"And he would inherit Lady Beech's money," Ridgeway added. "They have no living children. But we must consider all the possibilities. One of the other gentlemen may have had a motive we do not yet know of." He stared at the paper. "A jealous passion seems unlikely."

"If there were such a thing, it would make far more sense to kill Sir Anthony," Digby pointed out.

Ridgeway thought for a moment. "I doubt we are looking for sense, Miss Digby. If a man felt a woman had betrayed him, he might act quite irrationally."

"We would appear to be back to Sir Anthony again," Digby said with irrefutable logic. "He does not seem to me to be a man of such passion."

"It is not merely passion,

Miss Digby. There is much in man's nature that is complex and obscure. A man may feel intense possessiveness for something he does not particularly value, simply because it is his—and regard any man who trespasses as having violated his dignity unforgivably. I believe it is an adequate motive."

"Possibly." Digby was reluctant. "I think Sir Anthony a colder person than that. Mr. Marshall or Mr. Delamain I would believe it of."

Ridgeway's eyebrows rose. "You have had remarkable opportunities for observation, Miss Digby," he observed with a mixture of envy and incredulity.

She would not lower her gaze in the slightest. "I have overheard the ladies talking," she replied with a blush; it did not do to repeat what one overheard—not ever! But these circumstances were unique, and of very pressing danger to the people in question. She plunged on. "If the killer thought it was Mrs. Selden, then it may very well have been Mrs. Delamain—I am afraid Mr. Delamain's admiration for Mrs. Selden is very deep, and of a somewhat . . . passionate nature. It has not gone unremarked."

"Jealousy." Ridgeway wrote it down. Then suddenly he looked up and met Digby's eyes

over the paper. They both had the same dreadful thought at the same moment. They had seen Sophie's longing looks at Anthony Beech, had seen her gaze following his figure, marked the hesitant conversations, the quick blushes.

"Certainly not," Digby said without the certainty she had intended. "But we must prove it."

"We will." Ridgeway stood up. "Miss Digby, you must begin your detection by offering your services to Sir Anthony to pack Lady Beech's effects. If we apply our intelligence and deductive reasoning, we should be able to discover the truth, and prove it beyond dispute. There must be something which will lead us to an inevitable conclusion."

With another dose of laudanum for Croft, and plenty of sympathy, Digby had no difficulty in finding herself alone in Daisy Beech's room with the task of packing her belongings for Sir Anthony to take home with him when he left. Daisy herself was laid in the small family chapel in the east wing.

It was a sad duty, but Digby steelled herself to do it not only as a skilled ladies' maid, but as a detective at least the equal of Ridgeway.

The clothes yielded nothing,

except that they were not only of excellent quality but of a taste that Digby could only admire for its mixture of dignity and panache. All the under-linen was immaculate. The hats and gowns were expensive; she imagined Daisy's own money had probably purchased far more of them than Sir Anthony's. How much had that disturbed him? Was he aching to have the mastery of that money himself? What would he do with it? Pay debts? Keep a mistress? Marry some other woman, younger, prettier than Daisy?

The toiletry articles were what she would have expected, the arts and artifices of retaining what charms of youth were possible, richness of the hair, softness and bloom of the skin, a little color, a delightful perfume, the rustle of taffeta when one moved, the glimpse of lace.

Subconsciously she had put off the most distasteful task until last, but her sense also told her it would be the most likely to yield anything of use. Normally she would have packed a letter case without opening it, simply making sure that everything was cleaned out of any desk, pigeonhole, and drawer. Now she had to remind herself how much was at stake, and open and read every sheet of paper. Not that there was a great deal, it was only a stay of

some six or seven days. There were a couple of business letters, which were surprising in themselves—Digby would have expected financial affairs to have been dealt with by Sir Anthony, even if the money were actually Daisy's—but it seemed she also made the serious decisions, at least about the proposed purchase of a house in Bath. Judging from a letter addressed to her, the agent in the matter was answering some highly pertinent questions she had asked, and with care; it was no flattery of a woman who could be fooled.

Digby turned to the personal letters. The first was from a duchess and thanked Daisy for some past guidance, at the same time inviting her and Sir Anthony to visit them in the country for a weekend in the near future. The second came from a junior cabinet minister, and was couched in terms of both friendship, and, more curiously, a considerable regard for her counsel. He thanked her for past advice and told her how well it had resulted, and begged her suggestions in a further matter. Daisy's reply was already half written. It was of outstanding clarity, and she neither flattered him nor withheld her opinions yet the whole was well-expressed and courteous.

Digby stood in the center of

the room with an extraordinary feeling of amazement and dawning wonder. It would seem Daisy Beech was far from the rather pedestrian, middle-aged figure of some pity she appeared to Sophie and her like—in fact she was both highly intelligent and wise enough to be discreet about it.

Digby had often heard Pamela Selden say that much of the real political business of the nation was conducted not in Whitehall but in the homes of the mighty and the salons where the powerful met. The right wife, wise, discreet, with enough wit to amuse and enough charm to please, might be one of a diplomat's greatest assets.

Had Anthony Beech known that? Was that Daisy's true worth to him, far above her money?

Or had he perhaps not known it, and imagined his success was his own? Perhaps it had never occurred to him that without her he was of little value. Or maybe he believed she was simply a stepping stone for him, and had survived her usefulness.

These were ideas that altered all measures of motive.

Digby was still standing in the middle of the room. Everything was neatly packed in trunks and suitcases, the wardrobe and drawers empty and ready to be relined. She looked

at the pile again. Perched on top were the hat boxes, the writing case, and the leather jewel case. She had kept the key to give to Sir Anthony. She had not looked through that, it would do little beyond establish Daisy Beech's wealth and her taste, which was already known.

But thoroughness was important; Sherlock Holmes would not have overlooked it, no matter how distasteful or purposeless it seemed—or how dangerous. What explanation could she give for rooting through Daisy Beech's jewel case? She might easily be suspected of vulgar inquisitiveness at best, at worst of intent to steal.

Better lock the door first.

With the doorkey turned, she opened the jewel case and cast an experienced eye over necklaces, bracelets, earrings, brooches, and rings. There was a movable tray, which she lifted out. Underneath it were three stickpins of very moderate value, a silver frame with a lock of baby hair, memory of a life too brief, and under a cameo without a pin, a gold-plated locket with the chain missing. Feeling ashamed and intrusive, Digby opened it and stared at the picture inside. It was a young man, dark-haired with brilliant eyes, the sort of face that demands attention. It was familiar, yet for several min-

utes she could not place it. She had seen those eyes before, and recently, yet the hairline and the mouth seemed different—

Then as the upstairs maid's footsteps scurried in the passage outside it came to her—Evan Marshall! Evan Marshall twenty-five or thirty years ago. She snapped the locket closed, dropped it in the bottom of the case, replaced the tray, and fastened the lock.

Someone tried the door handle. Digby replaced the jewel case and locked it.

Knuckles rapped smartly on the door.

"Coming!" Digby called, turned the key, and found the upstairs maid pink and flustered, hair wisping out of her cap, standing outside.

"Oh! Miss Digby!"

"You may do the room now," Digby said with as much composure as she could. "I have packed everything. It is all complete. Just leave it where it is." And she swept past to find Ridgeway and give him the latest evidence.

Ridgeway received it with great interest, but Digby could not judge from his expression how much importance he attached to it. He spoke about logic and deduction and methods of reasoning until the library bell summoned him.

The evening was sad and subdued. No one felt like eating and conversation was stilted, more of an embarrassment than an ease. Anthony Beech had decided to remain; Daisy would not be helped by his abandoning his professional ambitions, the position she had helped him so much to build.

But under the sober exchange of minor politenesses the emotions were still there. Delamain and Evan Marshall subtly crossed swords, Sophie gazed at Anthony Beech with aching sympathy, and some time after the port had been passed, she at last found her opportunity to talk with him alone.

Freddie did his duty as host, but it was a shadow of his old art. The sense of loss seemed to have touched him more deeply than anyone else.

Delamain was subdued, compared with his normal wit, but not even death could spoil his admiration for Pamela, nor hide it sufficiently from Lucy for her to miss the look in his eyes and the lift in his voice.

The following day was Sunday and everyone went to church in the village, the ladies wearing their most sombre clothes even in the sharp sun, looking like moths against the pastels and scarlets of the flowers.

In the afternoon Digby found Sophie sitting alone in the library staring through the french

windows at the garden. She looked round as Digby came in. "Don't bother to iron my lilac dress for dinner, Digby," she said with a shadowy smile. "The pale grey will do—but thank you."

The lilac was far more flattering, and Digby knew it. "Don't you feel well, Miss Sophie?" she said with concern.

Sophie turned back to the window, the long lawn and the Albertine rose swamping the wall of the kitchen garden with a mass of coral blooms. "I'm quite well, thank you."

"You must give him time to grieve," Digby said. "In a few months it will be different."

"I doubt it," Sophie said bleakly, her voice hopeless.

Digby spoke from instinct, not detection. "Why not? Whatever has been said now is on the spur of shock and natural distress. You mustn't take it to heart."

Sophie turned round, tears in her eyes. "Time will not make any difference, Digby. I thought I was in love with him—he was so—so wise and dignified. I thought he had such earnestness—not like the shallow young men I know. But when you talk to him properly, I mean alone, he isn't like that at all." She sniffed hard and blushed. "Digby, he's—terribly ordinary—in fact he's rather a bore."

At first Digby was overwhelmingly relieved for her. The last thing Sophie needed, whatever she thought, was an alliance with a man twice her age, destined for political office that would require her to forfeit all the levity of youth and to assume onerous responsibilities from the day of her engagement.

Then the other implications of what Sophie had said came to her. A bore! Terribly ordinary when you talked to him alone. So it had been Daisy—her skill, her judgment, her charm—not only at the beginning, but even now—he was lost without her!

The question was—who knew it?

Digby found Ridgeway in his pantry decanting brandy. She went in quickly and closed the door. Ridgeway stopped, bottle in mid-air, his eyebrows raised. He was highly irritated that he had discovered very little of interest himself, but determined that his superior logic would interpret the facts she brought as Holmes interpreted the facts the loyal Watson delivered to him. He knew from Digby's face that there was something new.

"Well?" he inquired. "What have you observed?"

"It is far more than an observation, Mr. Ridgeway, it is a fact."

"Indeed?" He did not entirely hide his skepticism. "Facts may have many meanings. We must apply our intelligence to it." He began very carefully to pour from the bottle again. "Well—what is it?"

Digby felt a trifle dampened. Put like that it did not sound as revelatory as she had thought it at the time. "Sir Anthony is dull—in fact something of a bore."

Ridgeway looked at her over the top of the bottle. He might have been addressing an underfootman with grubby shoes. "A fact, Miss Digby?"

The color burned up her face. "Yes, Mr. Ridgeway," she said indignantly. "When one spends time alone with him and speaks to him socially he is most disappointing."

"That is the loosest of opinions," he said critically. "Lots of gentlemen are not especially witty or entertaining in conversation. It does not make them murderers."

"And it very seldom makes them diplomats either!" Digby snapped back.

Slowly Ridgeway put the bottle down and stared at her, comprehension spreading across his face.

"Are you sure? How do you know? Whose opinion is that, Mrs. Selden's?"

"No." Digby dismissed that; he was quite right, she might

well be biased. "No, it is Miss Sophie's."

"Miss Sophie? But I thought she—"

"She did! Until she had time to speak with him alone and at some length. She is most painfully disillusioned. In company and at some little distance he is glamorous; closer to, I am afraid he is very uninspiring."

"Ah!" Ridgeway let out his breath slowly. "So it would appear Lady Beech was the key to his success, not her money but her charm and judgment. But, Miss Digby, we must ask ourselves the question upon which all hangs. Who knew that? First of all, did Sir Anthony know it himself? If he did, we may exclude him from our list of suspects."

"I imagine he may suspect it," Digby began.

"Imagining is not fact, Miss Digby. It is not enough. We must do much better than that."

Digby drew breath to retaliate, then decided to play him at his own game. "Indeed," she said crisply. "We will work on eliminating the impossible. And it would seem we cannot eliminate Mr. Marshall. Since it is obvious from the photograph in the locket that he and Lady Beech were closely acquainted in their youth, he must have known that she was highly intelligent." She frowned as the thought occurred to her. "In

fact, one is led to wonder why, if he was a suitor, she did not choose him instead of Sir Anthony."

"Perhaps she did not have the opportunity," Ridgeway suggested. "Her father may have preferred the Beech family, in spite of their lack of money. They are considerably better thought of than the Marshalls—whoever they are! But we may never know that, and it does not concern us now. I think we may safely assume that Mr. Marshall was aware of Lady Beech's qualities, and quite possibly of Sir Anthony's limitations."

"So it would be greatly to his advantage if Lady Beech were dead," Digby finished for him. "His chances of obtaining the position in the Foreign Office are increased in proportion—especially since Mrs. Delamain has been behaving so—unreliably—with regard to Mrs. Selden. Jealousy, however well founded, is something a lady should never allow herself to show."

"Indubitably, my dear Miss Digby," Ridgeway said with aplomb. "Mr. Marshall had a motive—Sir Anthony may have, although one doubts it. Now how about Mr. Delamain? We cannot discount him. To prove the possible is not enough—we must also disprove the impossible."

Digby sat down. "Mr. Ridgeway, if Mr. Marshall murdered poor Lady Beech in order to incapacitate Sir Anthony for the position at the Foreign Office, he must have known that Lady Beech was an essential asset to him."

"We have already concluded that," Ridgeway frowned. "I thought we were agreed."

"We are," Digby answered. "But would it not also be necessary, in order for Mr. Marshall's plan to work, for the minister who is to do the selecting also to know of Lady Beech's importance? Otherwise Sir Anthony might be chosen anyway, and he would have killed her for nothing."

"Oh!" Ridgeway sat down also. For several seconds he remained silent; then he lifted his head, gave a very slight sniff, and straightened his back. "Then, Miss Digby, we must use our ingenuity to discover whether the minister did indeed appreciate Lady Beech's value—or not, as the case may be. And further to that, we will discover whether Mr. Marshall knew that the minister knew—if you follow me?" He raised his eyebrows questioningly. "And of course, whether Mr. Delamain knew. You will begin with Mrs. Selden, if you will be so good. I shall begin with Archdeacon Pusey. I understand Mrs. Pusey is the minister's sister."

The archdeacon may be party to much that we need to know." He stood up, readjusting his jacket to hang even more elegantly, and opened the door for Digby. "Come, Miss Digby, we have much to do if we are to obtain justice and prevent further tragedy."

Digby learned nothing of use from Pamela, but she did serve the other primary function of protecting her, as well as she could. After all, if they were wrong in their deductions so far, and it was not Daisy Beech who was the intended victim but Pamela, there must still be an intense danger present.

Ridgeway decided to be most solicitous for the archdeacon's welfare, to do all he could, personally, to make up for the shocking—and unnamed—insult that he and Mrs. Pusey had suffered in his master's house.

He knocked on the library door after having ascertained that the archdeacon was alone there, nursing his grievance—since he had no idea who was the culprit—by avoiding everyone.

"Good evening, sir," Ridgeway said graciously, closing the door behind him. "I wondered if you would care for a glass of Madeira before dinner? I have taken the liberty of bringing up the best the cellar has, sir; also a bottle of a most agree-

able light sherry wine."

"Ah!" the archdeacon grunted, but his eyes lit up. He was fond of a good Madeira, and personal service always pleased him. "Yes—yes, I think I will."

"Very good, sir." Ridgeway put the tray down. He poured a little into the glass and offered it to him. "Is that to your taste, sir?"

The archdeacon swallowed it all. "Yes, it is, thank you." He passed it back and Ridgeway filled it again and put both the tray and the bottle within the archdeacon's reach.

"A most difficult time, sir," Ridgeway remarked, moving a cushion here and there as if he had some reason to linger. "I am sure everyone appreciates your generosity in remaining. You must be a great comfort to poor Sir Anthony."

The archdeacon looked slightly surprised, but he was not a man to turn down a compliment.

Ridgeway sighed earnestly. "The fruits of victory will have little savor now, with such bereavement."

"Victory?" The archdeacon took another long swig at the Madeira, and looked confused.

"The appointment to the Foreign Office, sir—if Sir Anthony should be the man the minister chooses to fill it."

"He won't," the archdeacon said with conviction.

"Do you think not, sir?" Ridgeway's voice was heavy with doubt. "Surely he is a most excellent candidate? Fine family, such dignity, presence—"

"Rubbish!" the archdeacon snorted, then realized he had spoken with less than discretion and changed it into a sneeze.

"Shall I close the window, sir?" Ridgeway offered.

The archdeacon glared at him. "No, thank you. Lovely evening!"

"More Madeira, sir?"

The archdeacon held up his glass and Ridgeway filled it yet again.

"So you don't believe the minister will choose Sir Anthony?" Ridgeway pursued it in a most uncharacteristic way. It was ill-mannered, and not a butler's place, and it hurt him acutely. But if he were to solve the murder of Daisy Beech, he must have information. "Lady Beech was, of course, a great asset to him," he pressed on.

"Very great!" the archdeacon agreed with a wry face.

"Does the minister appreciate that, sir?" Ridgeway lifted his voice as if he were surprised.

"Of course he does, man! He's not a fool!"

"Indeed, sir, of course not! I'm sure Mr. Marshall will be most happy when he learns that—"

"Knows it already," the archdeacon said sharply. "Ambi-

tious man, but not out of the top drawer—not at all."

"No, sir. Then I expect it will be Mr. Delamain," Ridgeway would not give up yet. "He will be pleasantly surprised to discover that without Lady Beech, Sir Anthony is so much less suitable."

The archdeacon looked at him curiously. "I wouldn't know about that," he said with disapproval. "Thank you for the Madeira. That will be all."

"Yes, sir," Ridgeway bowed very slightly and withdrew.

"We have the facts." Digby and Ridgeway were alone downstairs in the silent kitchen. The last of the other servants had gone upstairs and the house was silent. It was quarter to midnight.

"It isn't enough," Ridgeway continued. "It is indicative, but it is not proof."

"It is not proof at all," Digby agreed. "There is a perfect case against Mr. Marshall. We know beyond dispute that he had the motive—he desires the position, and knows that Sir Anthony may well be considered more suitable, as long as Lady Beech is alive, and he knows the minister is aware of this. But Mr. Delamain might have known the same."

"We have no proof that he did." Ridgeway put the tips of his fingers together. "But your

logic is irrefutable, Miss Digby," he sounded slightly surprised. "On the other hand, of course, we have no proof that he did not. And it is always possible that Sir Anthony himself was not aware of his own limitations."

Digby looked very worried. "And there is still the dreadful possibility that it was Mrs. Sel-den the murderer intended to kill—and that may mean Mrs. Delamain."

Ridgeway thought hard. "We must devise a trap—that is definitely what Mr. Sherlock Holmes would do. It will be dangerous—" He looked at Digby. "Have you the courage, Miss Digby?"

"Of course I have, Mr. Ridgeway."

"Excellent. Then this is what I propose . . ."

Dinner the following evening was elaborate, exquisitely appointed, and set on a table white as snow and glittering with ranks of glasses and polished silver. Under the lightest veneer of civility the emotions showed raw every now and again. Freddie was subdued, still pale with loss; Anthony Beech spoke little and what he said was trite; Evan Marshall exercised his usual wit and amusing knowledge on all manner of subjects; Andrew

Delamain did not or could not hide his intense attraction towards Pamela—so much so that by the time dessert was served, Lucy Delamain was white-faced, except for two scarlet spots on her cheeks, and her eyes were hectically bright. It was not helped by Evan Marshall's referring to her situation a number of times with both wit and sympathy.

Ridgeway, flitting in and out to supervise, observed it and was not surprised. It was profoundly in Marshall's interest that Lucy Delamain should disgrace herself by an outburst of uncontrolled jealousy. Either Delamain himself was unaware of the danger, or else he was so obsessed he could not help himself.

By the time the gentlemen rejoined the ladies after brandy, the atmosphere was as brittle as spun glass, waiting to fracture at a touch. Shortly after ten the party broke up and Ridgeway had the opportunity to drop the explosive information he and Digby had devised. Separately and privately he told each of them, as if it were a small but happy incident, that after a decent interval Anthony Beech would marry Pamela—and was it not most fortunate, because then he would still have a wife of charm, beauty, and marked political skill.

He could not help trying to

gauge their reactions, and the result was disappointing. Delamain was startled, but he hid his chagrin more smoothly than Ridgeway would have credited, and Evan Marshall instantly closed his expression so that nothing showed except a heat in his dark eyes. It could easily have been no more than a natural dashing of his hopes.

The minister would arrive the following day.

There was nothing more to do now but retire—and wait. Digby and Ridgeway had played their last card.

Out of sheer necessity Digby had been forced to tell Pamela of her alliance with Ridgeway, and of their deductions and the steps they had taken to prove the truth.

At midnight Pamela was lying awake in her bed, but the lamps on the wall had been turned down and there was no light in the room except a filmy glow from the moon, enough to see a figure by. Digby was sitting in the dressing chair deep in the shadow behind the tallboy, and Ridgeway, tense, excited, and highly self-conscious, stood pressed against the wall on the far side of the wardrobe.

The seconds ticked by. Pamela lay between the white sheets with her hair spread on the pillow, her eyes closed, and her heart thumping so vio-

lently the pulse of it beat in her throat.

Somewhere in the house a clock chimed the half hour. Digby was getting stiff. She shifted her weight. Was this ridiculous? Had they been too obvious, laying a trap any fool would see—and avoid? Maybe no one had believed for a moment that Pamela would marry Anthony Beech. They had nothing in common... but then neither had many married people. Who could account for love or physical passion—or ambition?

Ridgeway moved his feet restlessly.

Quarter to one.

Pamela turned over, still wide awake.

Digby glanced at the bedroom door. It was open! She had not even heard the latch. Someone was coming in. The black figure was outlined for an instant against the white lintel, then softened and faded into the darker pattern of the wall-paper.

Digby sat so still her breath faltered on her lips. Ridgeway would not have seen him yet—he could not till the figure was level with the bed. Digby strained her eyes, but all she could see was a thickness in the gloom, a form, anonymous, menacing in its utter silence.

It was coming closer. Pamela's eyes were still closed.

Please heaven she did not lose her nerve and open them or she would frighten him and he might even now escape.

He was level with the bed. Ridgeway froze.

The figure stood motionless, staring down at Pamela. The moonlight was plain on his face now; it was Evan Marshall, his eyes black, his mouth hard and sad, but there was no irresolution in it, regret, but not pity. He reached for the extra pillow, picked it up in both hands, and leaned over with a powerful, quick movement, pressing it over Pamela's face.

Ridgeway lunged forward, banging the wardrobe with his

elbow, and landed almost on top of Marshall. He was a powerful man and heavy. Marshall had no chance against him. In moments it was all over, Digby had turned up the lights, Marshall was senseless on the floor, Pamela was ashen-faced, bruised, but otherwise all right, and Ridgeway was rumpled, hair wild, dignity to the winds, and totally, magnificently victorious. "Congratulations, Miss Digby," he said with extreme graciousness.

"Thank you, Mr. Ridgeway," she replied breathlessly. "Not quite elementary, I think—but most satisfactory—wouldn't you say?"

UNSOLVED

by Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

Last week was an incredible triumph for justice seekers everywhere. Five criminals were brought to justice in Rome and other famed cities around the world by Detective Portray and his colleagues; each offender was captured on a separate workday of the week. It was headline news!

From the following clues can you determine who caught whom, when, and where?

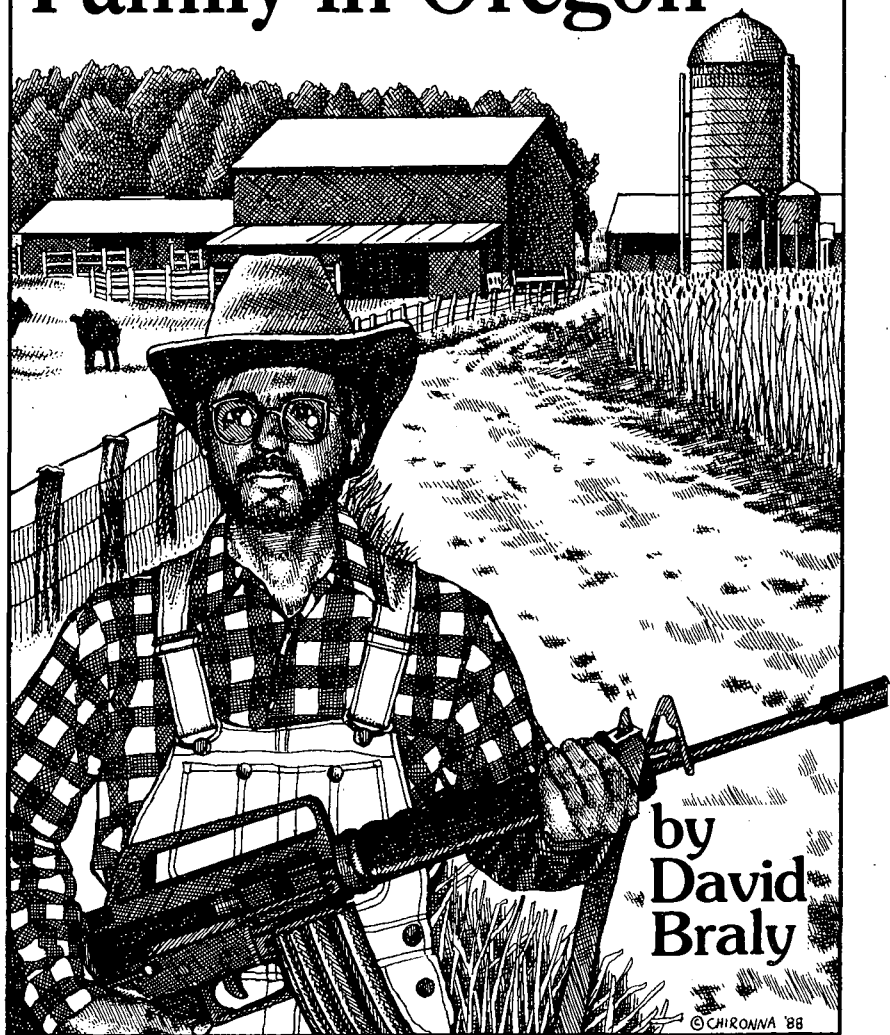
1. The crook hooked on Tuesday was pulled off a stage in New York.
2. Detective Paint nabbed his offender in London before the detective in Athens caught his.
3. The Graffiti Artist was caught before the Impostor, who was caught before the Hijacker, all of whom were caught before the Six-year-old, who disobeyed his mother.
4. Neither Detective Paint nor Detective Plane captured the Cat Burglar.
5. The Six-year-old was caught in the Kitchen.
6. Detective Parents grounded his culprit before Detective Portray.
7. None of the detectives caught the criminal closest to his or her heart.
8. Detective Pilfer pocketed his crook directly after Detective Plane flattened hers.

And now, to wrap it all up, can you figure out *how* each offender was caught?

See page 113 for the solution to the July puzzle.

FICTION

Fear and a Rural Family in Oregon



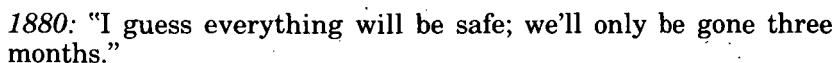
by
**David
Braly**

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Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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1890: "I guess we'd better have the neighbors check in on the place every week or so while we're gone."

1900: "I guess we're gonna have to get ourselves a watchdog."

1910: "I guess we're gonna have to get ourselves a good watchdog, dadnabbit!"

1920: "I guess we'd better notify the sheriff to check the place every few days while we're gone."

1930: "I guess we're gonna have to buy a lock for the door."

1937: "I guess we'd better let 'em sleep in the barn or they might burn it down."

1947: "I guess we're gonna have to get a locksmith out here to put locks on all the doors and on the barn."

1957: "I guess we're gonna have to start using the locks at night, even when we're home."

1967: "I guess we're gonna have to insure the outer buildings against vandalism and put locks on all the gates."

1977: "I guess we'll have to install a burglar alarm system for both the house and barn, so's we can be in town for hours at a time without having to worry none."

1987: "I guess there's someplace over in Portland a man could lay his hands on one of those Uzis or Mac-10s, and I aim to find it."

FICTION

Black and White

by Sybil Baker



Illustration by Brian Battles

104

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“Do we *hab* to go?” Dog Barker asked his wife, gazing at her moistly and knowing that he was exaggerating the symptoms of his cold. “It’s snowing.”

Claire, the only person in Otter Creek to say Doug instead of Dog, said, “No, Doug, we don’t *have* to go. I want to go. I can go alone. If I end up in a ditch, I’ll make sure it happens after the party.”

“Maybe I’ll feel better later,” he said.

Dog Barker was the city editor and chief reporter of the weekly *Otter Creek Gazette*, where the Lafollette party was duly termed each year “the high point of the winter.”

Lou and Betty Lafollette were brother and sister. A year or two apart in their early sixties, they bore a striking resemblance to each other: both diminutive and dapper, with tiny straight noses, neat little well-formed mouths, large bright brown eyes and black hair—still black and just a little less shiny than when it had been natural. “They’re so little and dainty,” Dog told Claire once, “they look like they belong on top of a wedding cake.” Indeed, because of the Lafollettes’ courtesy and consideration regarding one another, Otter Creek residents sometimes dryly termed the

couple’s relationship “the happiest marriage in town.”

The Lafollettes had lived in Otter Creek all their lives, in the biggest house in the county. It was white with black shutters, pillared like a Southern plantation, on a broad expanse of lawn guarded here and there by ancient beeches that rewarded the lush springy grass each fall with showers of gold: the rich get richer. No ant dared tread on the crimson peonies lining the circular drive. No one who received an engraved invitation would stay away from the Lafollettes’ annual “black and white” party without an excellent reason.

Held in the social doldrums between Christmas and Easter, it started on a Saturday afternoon and often lasted more than twelve hours. Even the women wore only black and white. More often than not, snow lay on the ground at the time. The white house, the black shutters, the black trees against the white ground, the matching guests—the spare elegance of it all was thrilling. And when the Lafollettes put out their hand-embroidered guest towels, Claire pointed out, they got used.

Dog eased his large frame into his old tuxedo and frowned into the full-length mirror. How

could he look rumpled in clothes a size too small for him? Meanwhile, Claire, in a black-sequined top and full white skirt, was studying her reflection at her dressing table. She put a gardenia just above her ear and then removed it, put it back again and took off her glasses. "One or the other," she said.

"It looks great." Dog went over and nuzzled her. "I can almost smell it." They gave each other soft smiles. "C'mon, the kids will be home next week," Dog said. One was at Boston University and the youngest was a freshman at Tufts. Their daytime privacy since September had been a luxury.

"You're sick."

"I'm better."

"Than the average bear," she murmured. Her eyes gleamed. "That may be."

"My cold," he murmured.

"If I'm getting it, I've already got it."

Dog chuckled, untying the black tie it had taken him ten minutes to tie.

And so, they were a little late. The black and white picture burst into color inside the Lafollette mansion. Brilliant ribbons and bows, balloons and balsam boughs graced every mantel, banister, and chandelier. And the fragrance of the balsam mingled with the scent of per-

fume, of yeasty rolls, roast beef, cigarettes, cloves, applewood blazing in the three huge fireplaces.

In the center of the largest living room, an ice sculpture of a dolphin standing on its tail, flown in from Boston, was surrounded by shrimp and oysters. Gentle waves of shimmering black and dazzling white broke on the shore of this succulent little island as the partygoers approached, loaded their plates, and retreated, in continuously shifting patterns. Dog and Claire, in the middle of the flow, waited patiently to be borne to their reward.

Nearby, Betty Lafollette, smiling gaily, patted the arm of a slender man with a silver mustache as he edged his way past her. Then Lou Lafollette joined his sister, and her smile vanished. She said something about leftovers. Lou murmured a few words, adding, "He'll be in seventh heaven."

"If his appetite picks up," Betty said. "He's wheezing." Her tone was low and accusatory. Having finally reached his goal, Dog speared a large pink shrimp, wondering what Betty was annoyed about. Maybe Lou had blown his stack. Lou Lafollette would give you the shirt off his back, but everybody knew he had a temper as short as he was.

Betty had left her brother's

side by the time Dog and Claire retreated from the seafood. Now Lou was standing with a tall young man with broad shoulders and so little meat on his bones that his body appeared suspended from a coat hanger.

"Have you met my nephew Blake?"

Then Dog remembered the young man, a student at Harvard who had attended two previous parties.

"How are you, Blake?" Claire asked.

Blake gave a wide grin. "Suber duber."

Ignoring his nephew's cheerful expression, Lou observed, "Poor Blake has joined the melancholy company of the afflicted." He gave a charming smile. "We no longer call it a cold, but *the* cold."

"You said it," Dog said.

Lou turned to Dog. "You heard them at the planning commission the other night. Bunch of seals, granting variances, considering important matters with lasting consequences that should be considered soberly and not by people sporting fevers of a hundred and two."

The Barkers laughed. Dog said, "Dab right. I got it too. I was so grateful they moved to adjourn early I was about to throw 'em each a fish."

Blake explained, "Uncle Lou's kiddig."

Lou said, "Blake, would you

do me a favor and ask Edith about the stuffed mushrooms? They seem to be behind schedule." Edith was the Lafollettes' incomparable cook, a vigorous woman in her seventies who credited her health to the generous amount of wine she consumed as she created her masterpieces. She had been in the family since the days when Lou and Betty were little.

"Sure, Uncle Lou. Where is she?"

"In the kitchen, I hope," Lou answered with asperity. His face was brick red.

With another amiable grin, the youth said, "Parties sure stress beoble out."

Lou bowed his head briefly, lips pressed together, then craned his neck as he made sure his nephew was out of earshot. "He's a nice boy; I wish I wouldn't lose my temper with him."

"Yeah, I could see how he could get on your nerves," Dog said.

"Doug!"

"Well, honey, I mean, look at it from Lou's point of view. I mean, it's okay not to have a sense of humor, but not when you're so happy about it all the time."

The three of them laughed. Lou said, "Oh, it's not even happiness, I'm sorry to say, it's just some sort of self-improvement kick he's on." In good humor

again, he continued, "I asked him the other day why he disapproved of me so heartily. And he explained." He paused in comic bewilderment. "But I still don't understand. Something about my spiritual path needing weeding or something."

An hour later, the waves of black and white revelers had considerably eroded the banks of shrimp and oysters. Plate upon plate of stuffed mushrooms and other hot hors d'oeuvres had been served, and the guest towels were satisfactorily wrinkled. The party had shifted from amiable to vivacious. The chatter was louder, the laughter more prolonged. A five-piece dance band played in the music room, where the Oriental rug had been removed. Now the kitchen also was full of people, and Edith the cook bantered with them and swung her wide hips, holding a wine glass in one hand and stacking the dishwasher with the other.

Dog was dancing in the music room with Maureen from the savings and loan when he heard the screams and the terrible muffled clatter that was so loud and so long, and, like everyone else, raced toward the kitchen.

There, staring at the open cellar door, some were talking to each other in hushed tones as others passed the word over their shoulders: "Betty, it was

Betty Lafollette, she fell down the cellar steps. Doc Sorenson's with her."

Steps were heard, slowly mounting. A great, collective breath seemed to be held. And then the physician shook his head, saying, "Sorry. She's gone." And as everyone gasped and murmured, Lou covered his face with his hands. The nephew, holding a handkerchief to his mouth, made a choking noise, his head thrashing from side to side.

Edith, her eyes as wild as a bull's and a fat hand splayed across her heaving chest, shouldered through to Dog. "I have to talk to you private," she muttered.

Dog managed to lead the way to a corner of the large kitchen. "She was pushed. I saw it, I saw it all," Edith said. "Now Dog, I'm talkin' to you as a friend, not as a reporter."

Dog kept his voice very steady. "Okay. Who pushed her?"

"That bad boy," Edith said.

He blinked. "Blake?"

"No, Lou." She stifled a sob. "That bad boy."

Everyone knew that Lou was Edith's favorite. That fact alone was enough to persuade everyone in Otter Creek of the truth of her statement.

Yet here was the nephew,

hollow-eyed in his despair, insisting: "Uncle Lou never touched her! The S.O.B. never touched her! I was standing right there!"

In other words, as Chief Vince Cavallaro put it Monday in his Noo Yawk accent: "We got one character who adores Lou Lafollette and who says he murdered his sister, and we got another character who don't like him and who says he didn't do it!"

"Both of them standing right there," Dog said.

"Both of them standing right there."

The two old friends sat on either side of Vince's littered desk, where the bright morning sunlight through the Venetian blinds barred the stacks of paper.

Lou himself was in the hospital, suffering from shock. When asked if he had pushed his sister, Lou had weakly told the police chief, "I don't know."

"And you know what, Dog? I believe the little bugger. He don't know!" Vince said.

Witnesses had reported their observations. Left to right, as seen from behind, Blake, Betty, and Lou had been standing at the top of the cellar steps. Betty wanted to fetch some chablis from the wine cellar. Lou said she didn't know where it was. Blake was ineffectually offer-

ing to do the job, while Betty and Lou argued over the location of the wine.

At the time of Betty's plunge down the stairs, Edith, wine glass in hand, had been up on a footstool by the corner cabinet, somewhat unsteadily looking for extra glasses. People had been telling her to get on down, they'd do it, and she was being stubborn, the witnesses said, and so the attention was on the cook and not on the three at the cellar door.

"It's odd the Lafollettes put up with that in Edith all those years," the police chief told Dog.

"What, the drinking? They didn't know any different. That's all they knew all their lives. If they went to dinner at the Wilsons', they probably wondered how the food got on the table." The Wilsons were teetotallers.

Vince laughed briefly, through his nose. "So Edith had a good view up there. Except she was blind drunk."

"Not really."

"But what made her say that? That Lou pushed Betty? I mean, say the nephew is telling the truth. I hate this kinda case. His word against hers."

"Yeah, but say Edith is telling the truth. I think you can count on Edith to be honest at least."

"Well, if she's so honest, she says there was never a cross

word between them."

"Huh. Well, they got along pretty well as a rule, I think. But I got the feeling Betty was a bit pissed at Lou at the party. I mean, nothing much." He told Vince of the fragmentary conversation he had overheard near the seafood table.

"What was that about? The nephew?"

"I guess so."

Vince rapped once on his desk. "I knew the kid was lying," he said. "He just told me this morning he hadn't seen any evidence of ill feeling between them. I had a feeling he was lying." He eyed Dog shrewdly. Dog could sometimes learn things that people were reluctant to tell the police chief. "You gonna interview him?"

"Sure."

Vince rotated a pen between his fingers. "So how you feeling?"

"Better."

"Good. I hate this kinda case."

Blake stalked to the window, to the grand piano, to the leather sofa. In gray sweat pants—none too clean—that exposed a slim strip of white flesh above the socks and a matching shirt that similarly bared his knobby wrists, he looked as out of place as a coyote in that elegant living room. "It's all so dumb!" he

said. "So incredibly dumb, stupid, dumb, I can't believe it." His cold appeared worse; the word came out "dub," sounded each time on the same note, and it hung in the air. Clenching his fists, he collapsed on the edge of a wing chair. One end of a barbell poked out from the skirt of the chair's slipcover.

"Oh," Blake said, following Dog's glance. He kicked the barbell back with his heel. "I was trying to get my mind off things."

Dog felt a pang of compassion for the lanky young man. So far, Blake had evaded the question, and Dog tried again. "Well, had you any reason to think there was a disagreement of any sort?"

"Yeah." He hung his head and shook it from side to side as if he were answering in the negative. "Dumb." He glared at Dog. "Off the record," he said.

Dog hesitated. "Okay."

"See, I don't lie," Blake said. "That cop kept saying had I seen anything, and I hadn't seen anything, I only heard it." He fell silent.

Pay dirt! Naturally, this kid would be a nitpicker.

"Heard what? You overheard an argument, then?"

The young man sighed. "Yeah." He seemed about to say more, but bit his lip.

"Were they talking about

you?" Dog prompted:

"Hmn."

"Was that the end of it?"

"Not really. Then they rant about how cold it is downstairs and how Eduardo's cold will get worse, or I guess it was Aunt Betty said that."

"Eduardo had a cold, too?" He hadn't meant it to come out so loud.

"Yeah. Just a little one."

Dog felt laughter building at the thought of the small dog with the little cold, but it was checked by the suffering in Blake's eyes. "My mom should be here pretty soon," the young man said. "She's flying into Boston and renting a car."

Dog was relieved. He had been at the point of inviting the boy home for lunch and was glad of the chance to talk to Claire alone.

Claire suggested that while their frozen pizza was heating, they haul in some wood while they still had their boots on.

Back and forth to the woodpile they trudged, rosy-cheeked and squinting in the dazzling light, as Dog relayed the latest information. "Can you believe that?" he concluded. "Do you think Lou Lafollette would have pushed his sister in jealousy over a dog the size of a peanut?"

"With *his* temper?" Claire's head dipped sideways, half ac-

quiescing. "It's really awful," she said. "Two itty bitty people and a tiny dog."

"Yeah," said Dog. "With a cold. I forgot to tell you, Eduardo had a cold, too. A little one." Chortling, he held his thumb and forefinger a quarter-inch apart.

Claire laughed also, then bit her lip. "It's really awful," she said guiltily.

"Yes." He turned back to the woodpile. "Hey, look at the robin!" Claire sneezed. "Gesundheit."

"I didn't see it. About time we got some spring!"

"Now you're catching it, right? The cold?"

"I guess." She shrugged with one shoulder. "Those poor people. And I always thought they were so devoted."

"Yeah. But if Lou pushed her, how come the nephew didn't see it, when he was standing right next to her?"

"Crazy, isn't it?" Claire's eyes were as blue as the sky.

Dog sighed. "They *were* devoted," he said with a rueful glance at his wife. "He would have climbed the tiniest mountain for her."

Claire giggled. "An ant hill." Looking stricken, she said, "Oh, Doug, we're terrible," then laughed again as she chose a big log from the pile. "She would have crossed a puddle for him."

Dog threw back his head in laughter and gave his wife a hug, log and all.

Where Otter Creek ran through the middle of town, it was about fifty feet wide. And so Main Street simply continued across a massive bridge, where on each side, the sidewalks were bordered with stone walls higher than a man's waist, the perfect height for an elbow-rest. On one side of the street, the current was barely visible. The brown water slid lazily by in great irregularly shaped plates that seemed to move every which way, at least on the surface. By the time the water reached the other side of the bridge it had gathered purpose for what lay ahead: a drop of thirty feet or more.

Summers, when the water level was down, boys would walk across the lip of the falls if Vince didn't catch them in the attempt. But in the winter, a huge volume of water crashed and boomed and built ice castles at the bottom. People would often pause on the bridge and chat sideways, as it were, watching the water, which seemed to lubricate the conversation with its own lusty flow.

Walking back to the *Gazette*, Dog paused on the falls side of the street, rested his elbows,

and gazed down. Here and there a stick or log would slowly appear, gain speed, and suddenly jump and bobble, as if in fright, before disappearing over the edge of the thundering water.

His gut feeling was that it was true: Lou had lost his temper and had pushed his sister down the stairs. He could tell Claire thought so, too. Man-slaughter. Not premeditated. A murder of passion. Well, irritation was more like it. Lord, what was the matter with people, anyway?

A sneeze sounded beside him. "Gesundheit," Dog said, even before he turned his head to see who was next to him. It was Blake again, with yards of muffler swathing his neck.

"Thanks. My mom's plane is late. So I figured I'd take a walk."

"Oh."

The two stared at the water for a moment, following the progress of a short length of two by four with a tattered sail—a runaway toy or maybe one launched intentionally. The shudder at the edge, the disappearance.

"Tough time for you," Dog said at last.

The youth heaved a mighty sigh. "Yeah. You know, that was one of the last things I heard before all this, all this... horror."

"What was?"

"Just before Aunt Betty fell down the stairs, somebody said, 'God bless you.'"

Dog frowned. "So, um, somebody must have sneezed."

Blake eyed him in what seemed a reproach. "I did."

"Oh."

They turned back to the water. Dog visualized Claire's blue eyes and a robin by the woodpile, and as he watched a forked branch disappear over the falls, the mystery dissolved. "So you closed your eyes for a minute, then."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. Everyone closes their eyes when they sneeze. For just a second or two."

"I don't believe that's quite accurate," Blake said with authority, in a way that suggested he had said the same thing thousands of times on campus. Then he gasped. "You mean, Uncle Lou might have done it just as I sneezed?"

And Dog saw the oddest expression play around his

mouth: a twinge of satisfaction, before it gave way to despair.

To everyone's surprise, when confronted with this new development, Lou miserably admitted that he had pushed his sister, saying that he'd said before that he didn't know if he had because he didn't know *why* he had. His evident remorse at the trial was truly heartrending, and he received a suspended sentence, and rarely went out after that, not even for the smallest snack.

Poor Edith left Otter Creek and settled with a sister in Florida. A New York tabloid picked up the story and ran it under the headline DEATH IS NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT. And for months after the trial, at which expert witnesses proved that indeed, one invariably closes one's eyes during a sneeze and other expert witnesses proved this theory false, the subject was one of intense scrutiny in Otter Creek. If anybody felt a hah-tchoo coming on, everybody else ran over to watch.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

Strangel; Marketing; power
Smothers; General Operations; revenge
Shoote; Production; jealousy
Stabb; Finance; money

Vice-President Strangel was the murderer.

FICTION

The Sky Has Fallen



by Michael Beres

Except for the momentary blast of air left in its wake, the train glided silently across the Nebraska plain on its cushioned, seamless rails. Its lighted windows were like a string of yellowed pearls. But as the moonless night deepened and the train neared the halfway point on its Albany-to-Sacramento run, lights began to go out and passengers retreated to the world of dreams.

Nicole and her father sat alone in the darkened sky deck. Nicole was reclined in her seat, was staring up through the dome at the stars. Her camera was in her lap, the lens wide open. If she saw a flying object, it would be a simple matter to bring the camera up and take an exposure.

Next to Nicole her father had dozed off. His chin pressed onto his chest and, because he had left his reading lamp on, his face was illuminated from below, giving him a ghoulish look.

Nicole studied her father for a moment and was reminded of Professor Diaz, her high energy physics instructor at the university. Professor Diaz, the ghoul who threatened to bring the wrath of the sky down upon anyone whose lab file was not complete. Professor Diaz, who once tried to put the make on her in the student union until she produced her pistol.

As Nicole looked from her father back to the sky she began to feel the pressure of study training, the pressure to take her computer from her satchel and go over all her class notes one more time. But she gripped the camera and fought the pressure off. If she was to be forced to use her spring break attending her great-grandmother's one hundred fiftieth birthday, at least she would grant herself some time to play.

Suddenly there was a flash above the train toward the front. The flash had illuminated the flat landscape and the inside of the sky deck for a fraction of a second, and Nicole realized she had involuntarily lifted the camera from her lap. She stood and looked forward toward the other sky decks. At the side of a sky deck ahead she saw a tongue of flame followed almost instantaneously by another flash above the train.

Nicole put down the camera and withdrew a pistol from her satchel. She looked at her father, wondered how deeply he was sleeping. Then she went to a side window, slid it open, reached out into the intense drag of the wind, pointed to the sky, and fired two quick rounds. She looked back to her father in time to see him come awake as the second bullet disintegrated above the train.

"Good sky! My hell! What's happening?"

Nicole pulled her arm inside and slid the window shut. "Someone's firing into the sky, Dad. I was just answering them."

Nicole's father snorted and rubbed his face and took deep breaths. Nicole put the pistol away in the satchel, waved away the sulphurous smoke, and went to her father. She sat next to him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I frightened you. It was sky foolish of me to do that."

"Yes," said her father. "You should have awakened me before you did it." Then he put on his mock-mean face, reached out and squeezed her chin gently. "I wonder how many others you've awakened, you devil."

Her father's game. A game in which she was to act out her pouting little girl part. "I sorry, Daddy."

He let go of her chin and sat back in his seat. "You don't sound like a little girl any more, Nicole. And you certainly don't look little. I know you didn't want to come on this trip. I know you would've much rather stayed on campus. But, for better or worse, your mother and I named you after Great-Grandma Nicole twenty years ago, and fifty plus a hundred is a hell of a long time to live, even for someone who's had a half dozen transplants."

Nicole hugged her father. "I don't mind doing it for you, and for Mom."

"Thank you. And now I think it's time to hit the old hay bale."

"Dad? One more thing before you go."

"What's that?"

"Could you fire one shot into the air so I can take a picture under the flash?"

"And wake up more people?"

"The train's soundproof, Dad. No one will hear it if you stick your hand up high."

"Why don't you do it?"

"I want to hold the camera with both hands. And besides, your pistol is a .45. The larger mass of the bullet will make a brighter flash."

"Technicalities, technicalities," said her father. But he went to the window, slid it open, took out his pistol, and, when Nicole nodded that she was ready, fired a shot into the sky where the bullet hit the velocity barrier and disintegrated, creating a strobe of pure white light that illuminated the Nebraska countryside.

Rather than spend the night in the cramped sleeping compart-

ment with her parents, Nicole decided to sleep in the sky deck beneath the stars. She turned on the television mounted on the seatback in front of her and watched a report concerning Hurricane Samantha, which was moving up the east coast endangering many military installations. A Coastal Force colonel being interviewed quipped that perhaps an advantage of the evacuation of the eastern seaboard during the last war, because of nuclear torpedoes, had finally been discovered.

Nicole switched to another channel. More news about Samantha. It seemed that a military hovercraft operating off the North Carolina coast had hit a strong updraft and been forced into the velocity barrier, which, at the coast, fluctuated between fifty and one hundred feet above the surface, depending on sea conditions. The hovercraft was not traveling at high speed, but its engine parts and rotor, upon entering the velocity barrier, exploded and destroyed the hovercraft, killing all aboard.

Another channel. Talks had resumed in Geneva concerning use of nuclear warheads in sea-launched gliders, balloons, and drone land vehicles. The previous round of talks had been deadlocked because of the president's insistence that a wire mesh screen one hundred feet high be erected around the entire North American continent. The story went on to summarize the opinion of a chief critic of the president's Sky Fence. The critic contended that the superior beings, upon seeing the fifty year project nearing completion, would simply create another technological barrier to humankind's predilection for war.

Nicole yawned, then switched off the television. Since her father had descended the spiral stairs, no one had come up into the sky deck. She was alone under the stars, the gentle rush of wind against the dome and the sensation of movement making her drowsy. Each time she opened her eyes after they had closed, the stars seemed somewhat blurrier. The mean old moon was not out, just the stars, the friendly, distant stars.

The voice awakened her, a man's voice soft above the drone of the train. The voice said, "Hello," and when she opened her eyes she saw his shadowed figure against the starlight. He was thin and sharp-shouldered—apparently wearing a jacket. He was standing at the far end of the sky deck near the spiral stairs. His hands were at his sides. In one hand he held a pistol pointed toward the floor.

"Hello," he said again. "I didn't realize you were asleep. Did I frighten you?"

"No," said Nicole. "Not at all."

"I was three cars up," said the man. "I fired two shots and someone back here answered with several. Was it you?"

"Yes. Actually my father fired the third shot so I could take a picture."

His name was Marcus. He was about her age. He had a .45 like her father's and insisted on firing a few shots for her so she could take more pictures. When she was finished taking pictures he aimed his pistol low, just above the horizon.

"Watch this," he said.

"Aren't you afraid you'll hit someone?"

"Don't worry. There's no one out there. No houses or anything. I looked while you were taking pictures."

He fired his pistol and a few moments later, at least a quarter mile away, it entered the velocity barrier and disintegrated in a flash that lit up a circular patch of flatness.

After putting away her camera, Nicole turned on the reading lights for her seat and the one next to her. Marcus put his gun into a shoulder holster as he approached, and she noticed that he was wearing a cartridge belt. When he sat within range of the reading lamp she saw that he was quite handsome, a handsome man about her age descending upon her in the night while Dad and Mom slept in one of the compartments below.

"Are you going all the way to Sacramento?" asked Marcus, raising his lovely, arched eyebrows.

"No. My parents and I are going to Salt Lake City for my great-grandmother's birthday. She's going to be one hundred and fifty tomorrow. Where are you going?"

"Oh, I'm getting off at the next stop. That's why I'm staying up." He looked at his watch. "We'll be there in a half hour."

Nicole glanced out the window at the blackness and emptiness. Then she looked back at Marcus. "Why are you stopping out here?"

"Research."

"Are you doing graduate work?"

"No, I just graduated last year. I'm into government research now. I take it you're going to school?"

"Yes. I'm doing graduate work in applied science at New York University's Albany campus."

"How interesting," said Marcus. "I hope you don't plan to apply your science to war."

"No," said Nicole. "I plan on being an inlander."

They spoke for a while about school. Nicole told about various classes and professors. Marcus did the same. He had done his graduate work in humanities at the University of Chicago. He said his research dealt with history.

Nicole spoke of the life style in Albany and asked Marcus how life was in Chicago. His claims were high for the largest city in North America, and he told Nicole she should stop there for a day on her return trip. He said that because he was a history student, and had studied the subject extensively, she could count on his advice. "Chicago," he said, "is everything New York used to be before it got torpedoed to hell."

As soon as Marcus started talking history she could tell, by his unbridled enthusiasm, that he would not try to put the make on her. In a way she had wanted him to. But now that she knew he would be leaving soon, she was content with social intercourse for the brief time they had together.

"Tell me, Nicole. Have you ever wondered how the velocity barrier got there?"

"It didn't just get there," she said. "It's obviously maintained. Research is being done all the time to analyze it."

"All right," said Marcus, looking a little perturbed. "Did you ever wonder who maintains it?"

"We know they do it from the moon and from flying objects."

"No, not where or how. Who!" He seemed quite impatient, like one of her professors, like Professor Diaz. "Who are the superiors?"

"Of course I've wondered," she said. "Doesn't everyone?"

"That's where you're wrong," said Marcus more calmly. "See, since the last war when the coastlines were destroyed, a lot of so-called recorded history has been quite fictionalized. Not all of it. Just selected parts, things that help us cope with this illogical world. Like flying objects. Did you know they used to be called unidentified flying objects? They changed the term when identifying them became hopeless. That was long after our flying days had ended. You do know people used to fly in things called airplanes in the atmosphere and spacecraft in space, don't you?"

Nicole sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, just because I'm an applied science major doesn't mean I didn't study *some* history."

"Sorry," said Marcus. "You want me to leave?"

"No, Marcus. Hey, I was just being cute. Don't go sky-mad on

me. I mean, I'm really interested in history. I've even been thinking of taping my grandmother so I have a record of what she remembers."

"That's good," said Marcus. "Do it. Did you know her longevity is related to our loss of sky life?"

"It is?"

"Sure. See, if we didn't have the velocity barrier, every time someone shot their pistol into the air we'd have to worry about where the bullet came down. Poor old Great-Grandma might have been shot through the skull by now."

"You're kidding."

"Okay, yeah, the real reason. See, way back then everyone was spending a bundle on all kinds of airborne military equipment. So after we lost the sky, a lot of the funds were funneled into medical research. Because they weren't around then, most people don't realize how much things were affected when the superiors dropped the old velocity blanket on us. Try to imagine it, a world in which bullets and machines of any design can go up without being destroyed." When Marcus looked up toward the sky he did look a little sky-mad.

"Just imagine," continued Marcus. "Just imagine one of those surveillance gliders with an engine on it. Like a motorboat engine with a larger prop that fans the air horizontally and drives that sky sucker hundreds of miles an hour."

"Well, yes," said Nicole. "I know it's hard to imagine, but a lot of scientists say we'll be able to harness the velocity barrier someday."

Marcus's face contorted in a way that made Nicole think he was ill. Then he let out a sky-mad laugh. He laughed and laughed, holding his abdomen and rocking back in his chair.

The laughter was contagious, making Nicole chuckle before asking, "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking," said Marcus, stopping to laugh again. "I was just thinking about how big that kind of flying machine would have to be, with thick shields to protect it from all those explosions pushing it forward."

"What's so funny about that?" asked Nicole.

"You sure you want to know?"

"Yes."

Marcus laughed once more, then cleared his throat. "Well, you see, I pictured you, because you're in applied science and all. Anyhow, I pictured you up there farting your way across the sky at

about a kilometer an hour in your million-ton contraption."

"I see," said Nicole as she watched Marcus rock with laughter once again.

Then, quite suddenly, he stopped laughing and looked at her seriously. "Did you know, my dear Nicole, that once upon a time very few people carried pistols with them? And did you also know that the initial purpose for carrying pistols was as a deterrent against foreign invasions and not criminal attack?"

Nicole knew this and nodded. But when she saw the strange look on Marcus's face she wondered if she should retrieve her own pistol from her satchel.

Marcus continued. "Some people claim to carry their pistols as protection against attacks by mentally disturbed citizens. But I have my own theory about the so-called mentally disturbed. In my studies I have come across several mentions of medical cases being sent to other planets. These were cases of highly contagious diseases that our planet's technology was not prepared to deal with."

Marcus smiled a silly smile. "Here is my theory. Sending people to other planets became quite attractive. Soon many contagious diseases were whipped into submission. Well, if the physically diseased could be dealt with so easily, why not the mentally diseased? So, without much hoopla—because who wants to deal with retards anyhow—the mentally disturbed were quietly shipped to various planets according to their affliction. The Earth planted its seeds on other worlds with absolutely no idea of what would grow. The scientists were quite excited about the experimental possibilities. But their little inbreeding experiment backfired."

Marcus stopped speaking and stared at her as if awaiting a reply.

"I don't get it," said Nicole.

"You see," said Marcus, "mental illness is a relative thing. In fact, recent experiments have shown that some forms of mental illness are actually mutations toward what humankind was to be. Have you ever heard of paedomorphism?"

"No."

"It's a kind of backing up to get a running start. It's a mutation that, although it seems regressive, is actually a new step in a different direction. Now do you get it?"

"I think so," said Nicole. "You're saying that some of these mentally ill people were the good kind of mutants and that they evolved on another planet for who knows how long until they became the superiors in their flying objects."

"Not simply 'who knows how long,'" said Marcus, mimicking

her voice. "In fact it wasn't long at all because these so-called mental defectives were quite prolific. In one hundred and fifty years—one hefty lifetime—they were able to produce ten generations of offspring."

Nicole looked up to the stars, tried to imagine the possibility of things happening the way Marcus had explained them. But then logic and reason—the very words *logic* and *reason*—arose in her thoughts. She smiled at Marcus and shook her head.

"No," she said. "I don't think it happened that way."

Marcus shouted. "Wait! Don't you see? You're letting your cerebrum get in the way! You're not letting it communicate with your cerebellum!"

Nicole stood, lifted her satchel, and backed away. "I think you'd better go now," she said. "Your stop is coming soon. It's been a slice."

"Yes," he said, growing calm again. "Yes. The train is slowing. Thank you for reminding me."

He turned and walked to the spiral stairs. After a few steps down he stopped. "Don't feel sorry for me, Nicole. It will be great fun where I'm going. They're trying to breed superiors. No one knows that I know. But I do know. I only hope the females are half as attractive as you." Then he went quickly down the stairs and was gone.

When the train stopped, Nicole saw Marcus get into an unmarked van waiting beneath a single light at the siding. As the van drove off into the darkness and the train started moving, she reached into her satchel and gripped her pistol. The feel of it was reassuring and brought back pleasant memories of her childhood kill-or-be-killed training at the day-care center.

Nicole returned to her seat, placing her camera in her lap. She reclined the seat and stared at the sky with her lens wide open and waited for the flying object she reasoned might very soon do its crazy dance of vengeance across the moonless sky.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Grinning God

by May Futrelle

The House That Was

by Jacques Futrelle





THE GRINNING GOD by May Futrelle

Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen—The Thinking Machine—readjusted his thick spectacles, dropped back into the depths of the huge chair, and read from the manuscript in his hand: "A little less than three months ago I had a photograph taken. As I look upon it now, I see a man of about thirty years, clean-shaven, full-faced, and vigorous with health; eyes which are clear and calm, almost phlegmatic; a brow upon which sits the serenity of perfect physical and mental poise; a pleasant mouth with quizzical lines about the corners; a chin with determination and assurance in every line; hair brown and unmarked with age. I was red-blooded then, lusty, and buoyant with life, while now—

"Here is a hand mirror. It reflects back at me the gaunt, haggard face of a man who might be sixty years old; furtive, shifting eyes in which lies a perpetual, hideous fear; a brow ruffled over into spidery lines of suffering; a drooping, flabby mouth; hair dead white over the temples. My blood has become water; all things worthwhile are gone. I have nothing left.

"Fear, Webster says, is apprehension, dread, alarm—and yet it is more than that. It is a loss of the sense of proportion, an unseating of mental power; a vampire which saps hope and courage and common sense, and leaves a quivering shell of what was once a man. I know what fear is—no man better. I knew it that night in the forest, and I know it now, when I find myself sitting up in bed staring into nothingness, with the echo of screams in my ears; I knew it when that grim, silent old man moved about me, and I know it now when without conscious effort my imagination conjures up those dead, glassy eyes; I knew it when vicious little tongues of flame lapped at me that night, and I know it now when at times I still seem to feel their heat.

"Yes, I know what fear is. It is typified by a little ivory god which squats on my mantel as I write, squats there grinning. Perhaps there is some explanation for what happened that night, some single hidden fact which, if revealed, would make it all clear; but in seeking that explanation I have grown like this. When it will end, I don't know—I can only wait and listen . . .

"Here is my terrifying story. Impatient, half-famished, and disgusted at a sudden failure of my gasoline supply, I ran my automobile off the main roadway and brought it to a standstill in a small open space before a little country store. I had barely been able to see the outlines of the building in the darkness—a darkness which was momentarily growing more dense. Black, threatening clouds swooped across the face of the heavens, first obscuring, then obliterating, the brilliant starpoints.

"I knew where I was, although I had never been over the road before. Behind me lay Pelham, a quiet little village which had been sound asleep when I drove through, and somewhere vaguely ahead was the town of Millen. I had been due there about seven o'clock; but owing to unforeseeable delays, it was now about ten. I was exhausted from hours at the steering wheel, and had had nothing to eat since luncheon. I planned to spend the night in Millen, eat a big meal, store up a few hours' sleep, then on the morrow proceed on my way.

"This was what I had intended to do. But an empty gasoline tank brought me to a stop in front of the forbidding little store, and a little maneuvering back and forth cleared the road's fairway of the bulk of my machine. No light showed in the store; but as I had not passed another building for two or three miles back, it seemed not improbable that the keeper of the store slept on the premises. I put this hypothesis to a test by a loud helloing, which in the course of time brought a nightcapped head to a window just above the door.

"'Got any gasoline?' I asked.

"'I cal'late as how I might have a little,' came the answer in a man's voice.

"'Well, will you please let me have enough to get to Millen?'

"'It's ag'in' the law in these parts to draw gasoline at night,' said the man placidly. 'Cal'late as how you'll have to wait till mornin'.'

"'Wait till morning?' I complained. 'Why, man, there's a storm coming! I've got to get to Millen.'

"'Can't help that,' was the reply. 'Law's law, you know.'

"Here was another dilemma, unexpected as it was annoying. The

tone of the voice left no room for argument, and I know the obstinacy of this man's type. I was prepared, therefore, to accept the inevitable.

"Well, if you can't sell me any gasoline tonight, can you give me a bite to eat and put me up till morning? I can't stay out in this storm."

"Ain't got no room," explained the man. "Jus' enough space up here for me an' the dog, an' he kinder crowds."

"Well, something must be done," I insisted. "What is the price of your gasoline?"

"Twenty-five cents a gallon in day time."

"Well, how about fifty cents a gallon at night?" I went on.

The whitecapped head was withdrawn, and the window banged down suddenly. For a moment I thought I had hopelessly offended some puritanical old man of the woods; but then a light glowed inside the store, and the front door opened. I stepped inside. The light came from a safety lantern in the hands of a shrunken little old man, who proceeded to draw the gasoline.

"How far is it to Millen?" I inquired casually.

"Cal'late as how it's about five miles."

"Straight road?"

"Straight 'cept where it bends," he replied. "They ain't no turn out nor nothin'. You can't go wrong 'less you climb a fence."

"The gasoline was drawn and paid for, after which the old man accompanied me to the automobile with his safety lantern. He stood looking on curiously while I filled the tank.

"'Pears to be a right smart storm comin' up," he remarked consolingly.

"I glanced upward. Every starpoint was lost now behind an impenetrable veil of black; there was a whispering, sighing sound of wind in the trees.

"I think I can beat the storm into Millen," I replied hopefully.

"I cal'late as how you oughter," responded the old man. "Ain't no thunder an' lightnin' yet, an' I cal'late as how they'll be a pile of it before it rains."

"I handed back the empty gasoline can, then got into my car.

"If I should get caught before I get to Millen, is there any place I might stop?" I inquired.

"I cal'late as how you might stop anywhere," the old man chuckled, "but they ain't no houses nor nothin'. They ain't no turnouts, an' you can hit it up as fast as you want to. You'll be all right."

"A sudden gust of wind brought a cloud of dust upon us, and the thinly clad old man scampered off into the house.

"I backed my car, then straightened out into the road, a wide yellow stretch as smooth as asphalt. Then I stepped hard on the accelerator, and went plunging off into the night.

"It might have been only my imagination, or it might have been, as the car swept on, that I thought I heard someone calling me; I'll never know which. But the lowering clouds and a quickened rush of wind did not make another stop inviting; so the car sped on.

"I knew an excellent little all-night restaurant in Millen, and was speculating pleasantly as to whether it should be a chop and a mug of ale, or a more substantial steak and potatoes. I was aroused from this dreaming when suddenly the glittering lamps of my car showed me, straight ahead, a fork in the road. Two roads! Here was another unexpected annoyance. I brought the automobile to a stop, in doubt and perplexity.

"To the right, one fork ran into the thickening forest, as far as the light gleams revealed; to the left, the fork seemed a little more marked, as if more traveled, and where the light melted into the enveloping blackness it appeared to widen. I leaped out of the car and went forward, seeking a guidepost or something to show my way. There was nothing.

"Then I remembered that I had a road map in my pocket. Of course that would tell me. A grumble of thunder came from far off as I drew near the car to examine the map in the light. Here was Pelham, and here was Millen; here was the little store where I stopped, marked with a star, which meant that gasoline was to be procured there. Now I was somewhere between that store and Millen. The map was a large one. It should show not only the main road, but every little bypath that cut away from it. Yet from the little store to Millen the road on the map was an unbroken line. There was no branching off, and yet here was an unmistakable fork in the road.

"I was perplexed, impatient, and incidentally starving; so hastily I made up my mind which road to take—the left, the more used one. Heaping maledictions upon the head of the man who drew that particular map, I started to get into the car again when the darkness was suddenly torn by a vivid flash of lightning. It startled me, blinded me almost, and was followed instantly by the crash and roar of thunder.

"Then came another sound—a curdling, nerve-racking scream—a

scream of agony, of pain, of fear which seemed to stop my heart for one fearful instant, then was lost in the thunder of the approaching storm. Suddenly all was silent again, save for the wind as it whipped its way through the forest.

"I was not a nervous man; so after the first shock the blood rushed back to my heart, my head cleared, and I was perfectly calm. But I stood waiting—waiting and listening. I argued calmly. Someone was evidently in distress. But where? In what direction? The singing wind, the whirling dust, left me no guess. And then came that scream again, this time a series of quick, sharp shrieks ending in a wail which made me clench my hands.

"But now I had the direction. The cries had come apparently from the road, somewhere behind me. I walked to the rear of the car where the taillight shot out a feeble ray, and stood peering off in the direction from which I had come. At first I could distinguish nothing; then a white, intangible something slowly grew out of the night—something hazy, floating, indistinct, yet unmistakably something. Fascinated, I stood still and continued to stare. The floating white figure seemed to grow larger and clearer. It was coming toward me; it would cross the path of the taillight in another moment. I caught my breath and waited.

"Suddenly the reverberating crash of thunder sounded again, nearer and louder, but unaccompanied by lightning. Instantly, as if in echo, came that scream again. Obviously it was someone in distress—a woman perhaps, lost in the woods and in terror of the approaching storm. If this was true, there was only one thing to do; go to her relief.

"I took a flashlight from the car and started back along the road to where I had seen the figure. With the light thrust straight out in front of me at arm's length, I ran back ten yards, twenty, fifty—and saw nothing. I screened the light with my hand and peered about in the gloom, and saw—nothing.

"A panic was growing upon me. I flashed the light to the right, to the left, and it showed only the gaunt, silent trees, straight ahead of me along the yellow road, and behind me toward the automobile. But there was nothing else—absolutely nothing. I rushed back to the car; but no one was there. I called aloud; but the forest gave back only the sound of my own voice, mingled with the swishing of the wind.

"Then I stopped still once more, and listened. For a long time I stood there, light in hand, until the silence grew more terrifying

than the screams had been. Finally I turned and walked back to the car. Somehow, the car gave me confidence. I struck the hood with my open palm, and laughed at my unreasoning terror. I had heard the screams, yes; I had seen a floating white figure. There was nothing very remarkable about it—it was a thing that could be explained, I was sure of that now.

"So, deliberately, I searched the road again, this time with the light turned toward the ground. I went along, stooping, seeking footprints. I found none. But I could explain even that: the wind must have covered them with dust.

"I straightened up suddenly. Something had sounded, something louder than the rustling of the leaves, louder even than the creaking of the trees. It was a crackling sound—a sound that might have been made by a foot pressing on dry twigs. It seemed to be to the left, and I turned the light in that direction. Grotesque shadows danced and swayed as the trees reeled about me. Then high up where the light straggled through the branches I saw something white—dead white!

"I cleared the road in a few strides and plunged into the forest with the light turned upward. I stumbled over rocks half-buried in the leaves; I slipped once into a ditch which I couldn't see. Finally my foot struck a fallen tree, and I went sprawling on my hands and knees. The flashlight rolled beyond my reach, and blackness swooped down as the light was smothered in the underbrush. As I groped for it I again heard that crackling sound, as of breaking twigs.

"At last, my frantic fingers closed on the light, and I shot the beam high above my head, seeking that white something up among the trees. It was gone. I paused to wipe the perspiration from my brow, and loosened my collar. A sudden shower of leaves came down upon my head; there was another zigzag of lightning, a nearby roll of thunder, and the sinister patter of raindrops falling about me like leaden bullets. The storm had burst.

"I stumbled back to the automobile, got in, and sent it forward headlong on the road to the left—the road which bore evidence of travel. The pace was furious; for somewhere behind me was a misty, floating figure of white, and somewhere a woman screaming. Suddenly the road widened where a path cut through the dense wood. A single sidelong glance at it as I rushed past told me it was not wide enough for my car. Again the road map was at fault. I remembered that grimly, even as the automobile went splashing

along through growing pools of water and invisible ruts. I clung grimly to the steering wheel with only one idea in mind: to get to Millen.

"Gradually the road turned toward the left, or so it seemed to me. But that too might have been the effect of an overwrought imagination. The road did not look so much traveled now, despite the deceptive ruts into which my wheels kept sinking. Yet beneath its sheet of water the steadily gleaming lights showed that there was a road, plainly marked. For a minute or more I went straight on, desperately, recklessly; then an illuminating flash across the sky showed me that I was plunging into open country and that the forest was gradually receding.

"Finally, through the swirling, drenching rain, I saw a faint rosy point in the distance. Whatever it was—a lantern, I supposed—it indicated the presence of some fellow human being. I drove straight toward it. The gleam did not falter or fade. Another dazzling burst of lightning answered my question as to the nature of the light. It was in a farmhouse—a farmhouse out here where there weren't supposed to be any farmhouses! But at least it would serve to shelter me from the fury of the storm. I took it all in at one glance, even to a small shed in the rear where I could park the car.

"I didn't pause to call out as I drew near, but drove directly to the shed and ran my car in. Then, guided by the constant lightning flashes, I walked around to the front of the farmhouse, passing through the stream of light from the window. It cheered me, that light. I knocked on the front door loudly, shaking the water from my dripping garments. I waited—waited patiently for half a minute. There was no answering sound of any sort, and again I knocked, this time more insistently. Still no answer. It was not difficult to imagine that the continuous roar of the elements had drowned my knocking, so I repeated the performance, thumping loudly. Still no answer.

"Even in this desperate strait I did not care to enter the house as a thief might, by forcing my way, and run the risk of being received as a thief, possibly with a bullet. So I stepped down from the verandah and went to the lighted window, intending to attract attention by rapping on the glass. My first glimpse told me no one was there; but the room indicated every evidence of occupancy. A big cheerful log fire was burning, and its flickering light showed books here and there, inviting chairs, a table, and all the little knickknacks that made a comfortable living room.

"I had no further scruples about it. I ran up the steps, and was just reaching out my hand to try the knob, when the latch clicked, and slowly, silently, the door swung open. Naturally, I expected to meet someone—someone who had anticipated me in lifting the latch—but I saw no one. The door had merely opened, revealing a long, broad hallway, with a stair in the distance, and unlighted save for the reflection from the living room. I took just two steps across the threshold, enough to get out of the swirling rain, then stopped and called. No one answered. I called a second time. The thunder was silent just then, and there was no sound save that of my own voice. I ventured along the hall to the living room door and looked in. It was cosy, warm, even more comfortable than I had imagined when I looked in through the window.

"All at once I was overcome by a guilty sense of intrusion. What right had I to enter a strange house at this time of night, even to get out of a storm? My personal safety seemed at stake, somehow. I turned and started back for the door by which I had entered, with the intention of remaining there till in some way I could attract the attention of the occupants of the house.

"But I didn't reach the door: for directly in front of me stood a man. He was tall, angular, aged, and a little bent. A straggling gray beard almost covered his face, and thick gray hair hung down limply from beneath the brim of an old slouch hat. He was beside me, almost within reach of my hand, almost treading upon my toes with his great boots, and yet I had not heard a single sound of his coming.

"I must apologize—' I began; but I got no further. He had not heard me, had not even seen me, to judge by the manner in which he walked slowly past me with his chin upon his breast, his hands clasped behind his back. I stepped back to avoid a collision.

"I beg your pardon—' I began again; but he had disappeared into the living room, stalked away noiselessly without even a glance in my direction, leaving me overcome by that indefinable sense of impending danger.

"I paused there in the hall and considered the situation. Surely the old man must have seen me; yet—yet—

"I'm going in there, and I am going to stay until the storm is over!' I told myself.

"I removed my coat, hung it on a peg, walked along the hallway, and stepped into the living room.

"It was deserted!"

"There are moments in every man's life when the weight of a revolver in his hands is tremendously reassuring. This was mine. I drew the weapon from my hip pocket, examined it, and thrust it into my coat within easy reach of my right hand. Then I stood by the table, drumming my fingers on it idly and debating with myself as to what I should do. I was looking toward the door by which I had entered. No one came in, and yet—

"Suddenly the gray-bearded old man was throwing a log on the fire. The flames shot up and the sparks flew; but there was not the crackle of fresh burning wood as there should have been—just this silent old man. My heart was in my throat, and I laughed sheepishly.

"'You startled me,' I explained foolishly.

"He did not look at me, but busied himself about the room for a moment, and laid his hat upon a couch. Then he went out by the door into the hallway.

"'Well, upon my soul!' I exclaimed.

"I sat down and deliberately waited for the old man to return. The uncanniness of it all was growing upon me—the silence of his great boots as he walked, the fire which didn't crackle as it burned, the lack of any sign or movement to indicate that he had recognized my presence. Was the old man real? I came to my feet with an exclamation. Or was it—was it some weird continuation of that horrible business in the forest?

"I put out a cold, clammy hand to the fire. That seemed real—at least, a warmth came to me, and gradually my fingers lost their numbness, and looking upon my own hand I fell to remembering the hands of my strange host. They were knotted, toil-worn, and the left forefinger was missing. That fact struck sharply upon my memory, and I remembered also a scar over one eye when he removed his hat. That seemed real, too, as did these things on the mantel in front of me: an empty spool; an alabaster cat, glaringly red and white; a piece of crystal of peculiar shape on the farthest corner. And near it, so close that at first it seemed a part of it, was a queer little ivory god, sitting on his haunches, grinning.

"I lifted the ivory image and examined it curiously. It was real enough. I had stepped back from the mantel a pace to let the firelight fall upon it, when suddenly I knew that the old man had returned. I didn't hear him, I hadn't seen him—I merely knew he was there. I felt it. I slipped the little image into my pocket involuntarily as I turned; for all my interest was instantly trans-

ferred to a tray of food which the old man carried. And I remembered I was hungry.

"He placed the things on the table in the same ghostly silence. There was a jug of milk, some jelly, a little pat of butter, and several biscuits. I went forward and thanked him. He was absolutely impassive, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, and seeming to have no connection with the things around him. He didn't invite me to eat—I assumed that privilege and gingerly poked a finger into a biscuit. It felt like a biscuit. I bit it. It tasted like a biscuit. In fact, I am convinced to this day that it was a biscuit. But against the reality of that biscuit was the silent old man and his ghostly tread.

"Real, or unreal, the food was refreshing and good, and I fell to with a will. The old man sat down in a rocker by the fire and folded his hands in his lap. I ventured a remark about the storm. He didn't answer. I really had not expected that he would. The modest supper brought a tingle back to my blood. My nerves were calmed, the room cosy, the fire comfortable. I was beginning to enjoy this singular experience; but an occasional glance at the swaying rocker where the old man sat by the fire kept me alert. The rocker swayed dismally, but without the slightest sound.

"The warmth, the food, and my utter exhaustion conspired to make me a little drowsy, and once at least I must have closed my eyes. Then I opened them with a start. From somewhere above me, below me, or from outside where the storm still growled, came that awful, heart-tearing scream again, ending in a wail that brought me to my feet. The old man did not heed the quick movement by the slightest sign—he was still comfortably rocking.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"Revolver in hand, I rushed toward the door leading into the hallway. The old man was there ahead of me. He didn't touch me, and yet imperceptibly I was forced aside. He crossed the hall and went up the stairs. After a moment I heard a door open and shut.

"Except for the noise of the storm, the scream, and my own voice, it was the only sound I had heard since I had entered the house.

"I went up those stairs; why I cannot say, except that something, a vague, undefined curiosity, seemed to impel me. And with this impulse came again, stronger than ever, that sense of personal danger—the feeling that had possessed me ever since I had entered the house.

"I groped my way through the darkness to the top of the stairs;

then my hand ran along a wall till I came to an open door. I stood there a moment, undecided whether to investigate further or to retrace my steps. I was on the point of going back down the stairs, but the flare of a candle almost in my face stopped me. The old man held the candle, shading it with his left hand, from which the forefinger was missing. The wavering light gave the withered old face a strangely drawn expression.

"He was within three feet of me, gazing straight into my face, and yet I felt that he didn't see me. For one moment he stood there, staring; then passing me, he entered the room beyond, where he put down the candle. I followed him into the room as a moth follows a flame. It was the light, I think, that lured me in. Here, once and for all, I would make an end of the thing. The old man, still noiselessly, went out the door by which he had entered, off into the darkness. The door swung to. Like a madman I sprang forward and shot the bolt. I don't know why.

"I felt caged. Whatever was to come, was to come here! It was an intuition that stirred more strongly in me than the sense of danger. I sat down on a clean little bed and stared thoughtfully at the single door—the only way out save by one of two small windows which I imagined overlooked the yard. I examined my revolver carefully. Every chamber was loaded, and the cylinder whirled easily. Well and good. I waited. What for? I don't know.

"The candle burned with a straight, unwavering flame, while I crouched there on the bed for a long time. The grumble of the thunder was growing faint and far away; but the rain swished against the windows in sheets. Here was a vigil, it seemed, and a long one; for sleep seemed hopelessly out of the question despite the insistent drowsiness of exhaustion. I wondered if the candle would last throughout the night. It was not yet half burned. I gazed at it with a certain returning sense of assurance, and as I gazed, it flickered, flared up suddenly, and went out.

"I don't know what happened then. It might have been ten minutes later, or it might have been a half a dozen hours, when strangling, choking fumes of smoke aroused me. My lungs were bursting for air. I struggled up on the bed, and was instantly conscious of the crackling sound of burning wood—of fire. *The house was on fire!* I rushed toward the bolted door, to find the flames already eating through the thin panels, and huge red tongues shooting out at me. I was cut off from the stairs.

"From there to one of the little windows! The glow far out through

the rain told me that the whole house was aflame. I glanced downward. Sinuous forks were below me, on each side of me, above me. There was nothing to do but jump. I had only a moment to decide. I drew in my breath and pulled myself upon the ledge.

"And then again I heard that scream. Far across the open field, where the glow from the blaze dimmed off into the shadows, I saw a misty white figure with outstretched arms fleeing toward the forest. A little behind the floating white figure, and nearer to me, well within the range of the firelight, the old man was following. Even at the distance I could see his chin drooped upon his chest and his hands clasped behind his back.

"The next instant I had jumped . . .

"I found myself in my automobile skimming along a smooth, hard road that led through a forest. It was not familiar, and I didn't know in what direction I was headed; nor did it matter, so long as I got away from those things behind me. My ankle was badly sprained, my clothing torn and burned in spots, and my head throbbing with pain.

"Then I found myself in what seemed to be a street in a small city. A faint, rosy line was just tinging the eastern sky. Houses to the right and left of me were closed forbiddingly; but just ahead was the solitary figure of a man, walking slowly, swinging a stick. I ran the automobile alongside him, shouting some senseless question, then fell forward in a faint.

"When I recovered consciousness it was to find myself lying on a cot in a strange room, perhaps a hospital. A physician was bandaging my ankle. A thousand questions leaped to my lips and some burst out.

" 'Don't talk!' commanded the physician.

" 'But where am I?' I insisted.

" 'Millen,' he responded tersely.

"It struck me that I should be here—that I should have reached the point for which I was bound even after all that had happened to me. It seemed centuries since I had left Pelham somewhere behind. Perhaps it was all a dream. But those screams! That silent old man! After a while I dropped into a sleep of sheer exhaustion . . .

"On the following day I was calmer. The physician asked me some questions, and I answered them to the best of my ability. He did not smile at my fright, only shook his head and gave me something which made me sleep again. And so for a week I lay there, helpless. But one day I awoke to clear consciousness. Then the

physician and I discussed the matter at length.

"He listened respectfully, and at the end shook his head.

"There is no intersecting road between the small store of which you speak and the outskirts of Millen,' he said positively.

"But, man, I was there!' I protested. 'I turned into the other road and drove till I saw the house in the open field. I tell you—'

"But he let me go no further. I knew why. He thought it was some mental vagary; for after a while he gave me a pill and went away. So I determined to solve the matter for myself. I would go back along that road by day, and find that silent old man, and, if not the house itself, the charred spot where it had stood. I would know that intersection; I would know even the path which led from the mysterious road off into the wood. When I found these I knew the maze would fade into some simple, plain explanation—perhaps even an absurd one.

"So I bided my time. In the course of another week I was able to leave my cot and hobble about with the aid of a crutch. It was then that I took the physician in my car and we went back along the highway toward Pelham. It was all unfamiliar ground to me; there was no road, and suddenly there ahead of me was the little store where I had bought gasoline that night. I would question the old man I had seen there; but there was no old man. The little store was unoccupied; it seemed to have been unoccupied for weeks.

"I turned back and traversed the road toward Millen again. I recognized nothing; I could find no trace whatever of a bypath from the highway, in any direction. And once more I went over the ground at night. Nothing! After that, the physician—a singularly patient man—accompanied me as I hobbled through the forest on each side of the road, seeking the house, or its ashes. But I never saw anything that even suggested a single incident of that awful night.

"I know the country, every inch of it,' the physician told me. 'There isn't any such place as you mention.'

"And—well, that's all. I know the doctor's opinion—that my story was some sort of delusion—a dream. And in time I came to believe the entire experience an hallucination. I was growing content with this interpretation, even knowing it to be wrong, because it brought mental rest, and I was beginning to be myself again.

"Then one day I had occasion to look through the pockets of the coat I had worn that night. In the course of the search I thrust my hand into an outside pocket, and drew out—a little ivory god, sitting

on his haunches, grinning . . ."

When he had finished reading, The Thinking Machine dropped back into the chair, with squint eyes turned steadily upward, and long slender fingers pressed tip to tip. Hutchinson Hatch, the reporter, sat staring in silence at the drawn, inscrutable face of the scientist.

"And the writer of this?" asked The Thinking Machine at last.

"His name is William Fairbanks," the reporter explained. "He was removed to an asylum yesterday, hopelessly insane."



THE HOUSE THAT WAS by Jacques Futrelle

The Thinking Machine rose and walked the length of the room three times. Finally he stopped before the newspaperman. "And is there really such a thing as the grinning god that he describes?" he demanded.

"Certainly," Hatch responded, and his tone indicated surprise.

"Not necessarily certain," said the scientist sharply. "Do you *know* there is such a grinning god?"

"Yes," replied the newspaperman emphatically. "It was taken away from Fairbanks when he was locked up. He fought like a fiend for it."

"Naturally," was the terse comment. "You have seen it, have you?"

"Yes, I saw it. It's about six inches tall, seems to be cut from a solid piece of ivory, and—"

"And has shiny eyes?"

"Yes. The eyes are made of amethyst, highly polished."

Again The Thinking Machine walked the length of the room

three times. "You came to me, of course, to see if it was possible, by throwing light on this affair, to restore Fairbanks' mind?" he inquired.

"Well, that was the idea," Hatch agreed. "Fairbanks was evidently driven to his present condition by the haunting mystery of this thing, by brooding over it, and by the tangible existence of that ivory god, which established a definite connection with an experience which might otherwise have been only a nightmare. It occurred to me that if he could be made to see just what had happened and the underlying causes for its happening, he might be brought back to a normal condition." The reporter was silent for a moment, with eyes set on the preoccupied face of The Thinking Machine. "Of course," he added, "I am assuming that the things he wrote down in his manuscript *did* happen, and if they did, that you won't believe they were due to other than natural causes."

"I don't disbelieve in anything, Mr. Hatch," and The Thinking Machine regarded the newspaperman quietly. "I don't even disbelieve in what is broadly termed the supernatural—I merely don't know. It is necessary, in the solution of material problems, to work from a material basis, and then the things which are conjured up by fear may be dissipated. That is done by logic, Mr. Hatch. Disregard the supernatural, so called, in our material problems, and logic is as inevitable as the fact that two and two make four, not sometimes, but all the time."

"You don't deny the possibility of the so-called supernatural, then?"

"I don't deny anything until I know," was the response. "I don't know that there is a supernatural force; therefore," and he shrugged his slender, stooping shoulders, "I work only from a material basis. If this manuscript states facts, then Fairbanks saw an old man, *not* a spook; he saw a woman, *not* a wraith; he jumped to escape a real fire, *not* a ghost fire. When we disregard the supernatural, we must admit that everything was real, unless it was pure invention, and the sprained ankle and burned clothing are against that. If these were real people, we can find them—that's all there is to it."

The Thinking Machine rose from the chair. "Now the first thing to do is to see Fairbanks in person. I think, if he can comprehend at all, that I may be able to help him."

The Thinking Machine was cordially, even deferentially, receiv-

ed by Dr. Pollock, physician-in-charge of the Westbrook Sanatorium.

"I should like to spend ten minutes in the padded cell with Fairbanks," Professor Van Dusen announced.

Dr. Pollock regarded him curiously, but without surprise. "It's dangerous," he remarked doubtfully. "I have no objection, of course, but I should advise that a couple of keepers go in with you."

"I'll go alone," announced the diminutive man of science. "By the way, you have that little ivory god here, haven't you? Let me see it, please."

It was produced and subjected to a searching scrutiny, after which the scientist set it up on a table, dropped into a seat facing it, leaned forward on his elbows, and sat staring straight into the amethyst eyes for a long time. A silence fell upon the watchers as he sat there immovable, minute after minute. Hatch absently glanced at his watch and went over and looked out the window. The thing was getting on his nerves.

At last the scientist rose and thrust the grinning god into his pocket. "Now, please," he directed curtly, "I shall go into the cell with Fairbanks alone. I want the door closed behind me, and I want that door to remain closed for ten minutes. Under no circumstances must there be any interruption." He turned upon Dr. Pollock. "Don't have any fears for me. I'm not a fool."

Dr. Pollock led the way along the corridor, down some stairs, and paused before a door.

"Just ten minutes—no more, no less," directed the scientist.

The key was inserted in the lock, and the door swung on its hinges. Instantly the ears of the three men were assailed by a torrent of screams. The maniac rushed for the door, and Hatch for an instant gazed straight into a distorted, pallid face in which there was no trace of intelligence, or even of humanity. He turned away with a shudder. Dr. Pollock thrust his arm forward to stay the swaying figure, and glanced round at The Thinking Machine doubtfully.

"Look at me! Look at me!" commanded the scientist sharply, and the squint blue eyes fearlessly met the glitter of madness in the eyes of Fairbanks. The Thinking Machine raised his right hand in front of his face, and instantly the incoherent ravings stopped, while some strange, sudden change came over the maniacal face. In the scientist's right hand was the grinning god. That was the magic which had stilled the ravings. Slowly, with his eyes fixed

upon those of the maniac, the scientist edged his way into the cell, Fairbanks retreating almost imperceptibly. Never for an instant did the maniacal eyes leave the ivory image; yet he made no attempt to seize it; he seemed merely fascinated.

"Close the door," directed The Thinking Machine quietly, without so much as a glance back. "Ten minutes!"

Dr. Pollock closed the door and turned the key in the lock, after which he looked at the newspaperman with an expression of frank bewilderment on his face. Hatch said nothing, only glanced at his watch.

One minute, two minutes, three minutes . . . The second hand of Hatch's watch moved at a snail's pace . . . Four minutes, five minutes, six minutes. Then through the heavy, padded wall came faintly the sound of hoarse cries, of screams, and finally the crash of something falling. Dr. Pollock's face paled a little and he began to turn the key in the lock.

"No!" and Hatch sprang forward to seize the physician's hand.

"But he's in danger," declared the doctor, "perhaps even killed!" Again he tugged at the door.

"No!" said Hatch again, and he shoved the physician aside. "He said ten minutes, and—and I know the man!"

Eight minutes . . . The screaming had stopped; there was dead silence. Nine minutes . . . Still they stood there, Hatch guarding the door, and his eyes unflinchingly fixed on the physician's face. Ten minutes—and Hatch opened the door.

Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen was sitting calmly on a padded seat beside Fairbanks, with one slender hand resting on his pulse. Fairbanks himself sat with the ivory image held close to his eyes, babbling and mumbling at it incoherently. An overturned table lay in the middle of the cell. So great had been the power used to upset it that an iron bolt which held the table fast to the floor had been broken off. The scientist rose and came toward them; and Hatch drew a deep breath of relief.

"I would advise that this man be placed in another cell," said the little scientist quietly. "There is no further need to keep him in a padded cell. Put him somewhere where he can see outside and find something to attract his attention. Meanwhile, let him keep that ivory image, and there'll be no more raving."

"What—what did you do to him?" demanded the physician, in perplexity.

"Nothing—yet," was the enigmatic response. "I'd like him to stay

here a couple of days longer, under constant watch as to his physical condition—never mind his mental condition now—and then with your permission I'll make a little experiment."

William Fairbanks sat beside The Thinking Machine in a huge touring car, with the slender hand of the scientist resting lightly on his wrist. In front of them was the chauffeur; and behind them sat Hutchinson Hatch and Dr. Pollock. They were scudding along a smooth road, guided by the ribbons of light which shot out ahead from their forward lamps. The night was perfectly black, with not a light visible save those carried by their own car.

Behind them lay the quiet little village of Pelham, and miles away in front was the town of Millen. From time to time, as the car rushed on, The Thinking Machine peered inquisitively through the darkness into the face of the man beside him; but he could barely make out its general shape—a pallid splotch in the darkness. The hand lay quietly beside his own, and a voice mumbled—that was all. The newspaperman and the physician had nothing to say; they too were peering vainly at Fairbanks.

At last, the outlines of a small building loomed dimly in front of them, just off the road. The Thinking Machine leaned forward and touched the chauffeur on the arm.

"We'll stop here for gasoline."

"Gasoline—stop here for gasoline!" babbled the senseless voice beside him.

The Thinking Machine felt the hand he held move spasmodically as the huge car ran off the main roadway and maneuvered back and forth to clear the fairway of its bulk. Finally it stopped, within a few feet of the door of the building.

Hutchinson Hatch and Dr. Pollock rose and got out. Hatch went straight to the little building and rapped sharply on the door. The sound caused Fairbanks to turn vacant, wavering eyes in that direction. After a moment a nightcapped head appeared at the window above. The Thinking Machine shot the beam of a flashlight into Fairbanks' face. The eyes, now fixed on the nightcapped head, were wide open, and a glint of childish curiosity lay in them. The babblings were silent for a moment—somewhere in a recess of the maddened brain a germ of intelligence was struggling.

Hatch began and concluded negotiations for five gallons of gasoline. A shrunken old man brought it out in a can, and scuttled back into the house with his safety lantern. Dr. Pollock and Hatch

took their seats again, while The Thinking Machine got out and went round to the back, where he spoke to the chauffeur, who was busy at the tank. The chauffeur nodded as if he understood, and followed the scientist to his seat.

"Now for Millen," directed the scientist quietly.

"Millen!" Fairbanks repeated.

The chauffeur twisted his wheel, backed a little, then whirled his car straight to the road again, and shot out through the darkness. For two or three minutes there was complete silence, save for the whir of the engine and the wish of the tires on the road. Then The Thinking Machine spoke over his shoulder to Hatch and Dr. Pollock.

"Did either of you notice anything peculiar?" he inquired.

"No," was the simultaneous response. "Why?"

"Mr. Hatch, you have that automobile map," the scientist continued. "Take this electric light and examine it once more, to satisfy us that there is no road between the little store and Millen."

"I know there isn't," Hatch told him.

"Do as I say!" directed the other. "We can't afford to make mistakes."

Obediently enough, Hatch and Dr. Pollock studied the map. There was the road, straight away from the star indicating the gas station, and on to Millen. There was not a bypath or deviation of any kind marked on it.

"Straight as a string," Hatch announced.

"Now look!" directed The Thinking Machine.

The huge car slowed up and came to a standstill. The glittering lamps of the car showed a fork in the road—two roads, where there were not supposed to be two roads! Hatch glared at them for a moment, then fumbled awkwardly with the automobile map.

"Why, hang it! There can't be two roads!" he declared.

"But there they are," replied The Thinking Machine.

He felt Fairbanks' hand flutter, and then it was raised suddenly. Again he threw the light on the pallid face. A strange expression was there; a set, incredible expression which might have meant anything. The eyes were turned ahead to where the road was split by a small clump of trees.

"Keep on to your left," The Thinking Machine directed the chauffeur, without, however, removing his eyes from the face of the man beside him. "A little more slowly."

The car started up again and swung off to the left, sharply. Every

eye, save the squint, blue ones of the scientist, was turned ahead; he was still staring into the face of his patient. Only the chauffeur realized what a steady turn to the left the car made; but he said nothing, only felt his way along till suddenly the road widened a little where a path cut through the dense forest. The car slowed up.

"Don't stop!" commanded the scientist sharply. "Go ahead!"

With a sudden spurt the car rushed forward, skimming along easily for a time, and then the heavy jolting told them that the road was growing rougher, and here, dimly ahead of them, they saw an open patch of sky. It was evidently the edge of the forest. The car went steadily on, and out into the open, clear of the forest; then the chauffeur slowed down.

"There isn't any road here," he said.

"Go on!" directed The Thinking Machine. "Road or no road—straight ahead!"

The chauffeur took a new grip on his wheel and went straight ahead, over plowed ground, apparently, for the bumping and jolting were terrific, and the steering gear tore at the sockets of his arms. For two or three minutes they proceeded this way, while the scientist's light still played on Fairbanks' face and the squint eyes unwaveringly watched every tiny change in it.

"There!" shrieked Fairbanks suddenly, and he struggled to rise.

"There!"

Hatch and Dr. Pollock saw it at the same instant—a faint, rosy point in the distance; The Thinking Machine didn't alter the direction of his gaze.

"Straight for the light!" he commanded.

... the room showed every evidence of occupancy ... log fire was burning, and its flickering light showed books here and there ... directly in front stood a man, tall, angular, aged, and a little bent ... hands were knotted, toil-worn; and the left forefinger was missing ... eyes white and glassy ...

With a choking, guttural exclamation, Fairbanks darted forward and placed the grinning god on the mantel beside the piece of crystal, then turned back to The Thinking Machine and seized him by the arm, as a child might have sought protection. Meanwhile, the strange old man, who seemed oblivious of their presence, stood beside the fire. The scientist extended his hand and touched the old man on the shoulder. He started violently and stretched out both hands instinctively.

Then, while Hatch and Dr. Pollock looked on silently, The Thinking Machine stood motionless, while the strange old man's hands ran up his arm, and the fingers touched The Thinking Machine's face. The right forefinger paused for an instant at the scientist's eyes, then was placed lightly across Professor Van Dusen's thin lips. It remained there.

"You are blind?" asked the scientist.

The strange old man nodded.

"You are deaf?"

Again the old man nodded. His forefinger still rested lightly on The Thinking Machine's lips.

"You are dumb?" the scientist went on.

Again the nod.

"Deafness, dumbness, blindness, result of disease?"

The nod again.

The Thinking Machine turned, grasped Fairbanks' hand, and lifted it to the old man's shoulder.

"Real, real!" said The Thinking Machine slowly to Fairbanks.

"A man—you understand?"

Fairbanks merely stared back; but it was evident that some great struggle was going on in his mind. There was a growing interest in his face, his mouth was no longer flabby, and his eyes were fixed.

... then came another sound ... a curdling, nerve-racking scream ... a scream of agony, of pain ...

At the first sound Fairbanks had straightened up, then slowly he started forward. Three steps, and he fell. Hatch and Dr. Pollock turned him over and found an expression of utter, cringing fear on his face. The eyes were glittering, and he was babbling again. Only his weakness had prevented flight.

"Stay there!" said The Thinking Machine, and ran out of the room.

Hatch heard him as he went up the steps; then after a moment there came more screams—rather, a sharp, intermittent wailing. Fairbanks struggled feebly, then lay still, flat on his back. A minute more, and The Thinking Machine returned, leading a woman by the hand—a woman in a gingham apron and with her hair flying loose about her face. He went straight to the old man, who had stood motionless through it all, and raised the toil-worn finger to his lips.

"This woman—your wife?" he asked.

The old man shook his head.

"Your sister?"

The old man nodded.

"She is insane?"

Again a nod.

The woman stood for an instant with roving eyes, then rushed toward the mantel with a peculiar sobbing cry. In another instant she had clasped the ugly ivory image to her withered breast, and was crooning to it softly, as a mother to her babe. Fairbanks raised himself from the floor, stared at her dully for a moment, then fell back into the arms of Dr. Pollock and Hatch. He had fainted.

"I think, gentlemen, that is all," remarked The Thinking Machine.

It was more than a month later that The Thinking Machine called on William Fairbanks at his home. The young man was sitting up in bed, weak but intelligently aware of everything about him. There was still an occasional restlessness in his eyes; but that was all.

"You remember me, Mr. Fairbanks?" began the scientist.

"Yes," was the reply.

"You remember the events of the night we spent together?"

"Everything, from the time the automobile left the road and the light appeared in the distance," said Fairbanks. "I remember seeing the old man again, and the woman. I know now that he was deaf and dumb and blind, and that she was insane. That seems to clear the situation a great deal." He passed a wasted hand across his brow. "But where is the place? I couldn't find it."

"Listen to me carefully, please," said The Thinking Machine. "When you were placed in a sanatorium, the ivory image was taken away from you. I went into the room where you were confined and gave it back to you. It acted as I thought it would—it quieted you. To make certain that it was this and nothing else that had that effect, I took it away from you again, and you grew violent—as a matter of fact, you became so violent that you overturned a heavy table that was bolted to the floor.

"I left the image with you. That really was the tangible cause of your condition. If it hadn't been for that, and your constant brooding over the mystery, the events of that first night would in time have passed out of your mind. But what happened was that you superinduced self-hypnotism with that little image. You understand, of course, that self-hypnotism is possible only to persons of a certain temperament—and only when the object employed to

induce self-hypnotism is polished and shiny.

"Although that image brought you to the condition you were in, I restored the little idol to you to quiet you physically. That was necessary before I could reproduce for you the events of the first night. You went with us in an automobile, from Pelham to the little store where you had stopped that first night for gasoline. We too stopped for gasoline, and saw the man you saw that first night. As a matter of fact, he had gone away only for a short time, and is now installed in the little store again.

"Well, from the little store we went as you went the night of your first trouble, until we came to the two roads, one leading by sharp turns to the left. Then we went straight to the farmhouse where the old man and the woman lived. There I wanted to convince you that they were real people—that there was nothing of the ghostly about them. As a matter of fact, the old man and the woman never even realized that you were in the house that night. The man had no means of knowing it, so long as you never touched him, nor he you. You say he brought in something to eat. In all probability that was intended for the woman. You assumed it was for yourself. The fire which compelled you to jump, and which resulted in your sprained ankle, did not destroy the house. There were still marks of the fire there; but the heavy rain extinguished it, and carpenters made the necessary repairs. Now all that is clear, isn't it?"

"Perfectly; but the white thing in the road—the screaming?"

"There is no mystery whatever about that," continued the scientist calmly. "The road that turns to the left turns more sharply than you imagine. After a little distance it goes almost parallel with the main road, so that following it at night you would, without any knowledge of it, pass within a few hundred feet of a point on the main road. Now the house where these people live is, say, five hundred feet from the road that turns to the left—therefore, not more than seven or eight hundred feet, we'll say, from the main road. Thus the screaming you heard on the main road was from the woman who lived in that house; the figure you saw was that woman. Just why she had left the house and was wandering through the wood, we do not know; it is certain that she was there, and was frightened by the storm. Also, she was probably aware that you were pursuing her, and took refuge on an overhanging limb, thus giving you the impression of her figure rising.

"It followed naturally that by the time you had taken the round-about way with your automobile and reached the house, she had

already reached it by going straight ahead through the wood—and again you heard her screams there. Many things happened in the house that night of no consequence in themselves, but which to your excited imagination were mysterious. One of these was the incident of the candle going out. It is obvious that a gust of wind did that, or else a leak in the roof.”

Fairbanks was silent for several minutes as he lay back with his eyes closed. “But the vital thing, the thing that bewildered me most of all,” he said slowly, “you haven’t touched. Why was it that after all my searching I could never again find either the road to the left or the farmhouse?”

“Of course you don’t remember,” explained The Thinking Machine, “but the night we all went over the route I asked Dr. Pollock and Mr. Hatch just after we left the little store whether they had noticed anything peculiar. They replied in the negative. As a matter of fact,” and the scientist was speaking very quietly, “our automobile went the same way yours had gone—not toward Millen, as you supposed and as they supposed, *but back toward Pelham!* You never again found the road to the left or the farmhouse for the simple reason that they were on the other side of the little store—toward Pelham, eight or ten miles away.”

A great wave of relief swept over the young man, and he leaned forward eagerly. “But wouldn’t I have known when I turned the wrong way?”

The Thinking Machine shrugged his shoulders. “You would have known in daylight, yes,” was the reply, “but at night, in a hurry and confused by the flying dust, you simply turned the wrong way. You see how possible it is when I tell you that neither Dr. Pollock nor Mr. Hatch noticed that we had turned the wrong way, even when there was no storm and when I virtually called it to their attention.”

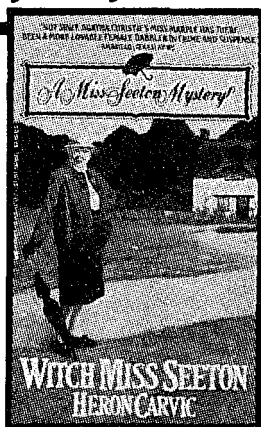
There was a long silence. Fairbanks dropped back in the bed, silent.

“In your manuscript,” resumed The Thinking Machine at last, “you mentioned that you seemed to hear someone calling you as you started away from the little store. This you attributed vaguely to imagination. As a matter of fact, you did hear someone call—it was the man who had sold you the gasoline. He knew you intended going to Millen, saw that you had turned the wrong way, and called to tell you so. You didn’t wait to hear.”

And that was all there was to the Mystery of the House That Was . . .

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



There won't be a sequin-studded chorus line chanting, "Hello, Miss Seeton, it's so nice to have you back where you belong," that is, on the paperback mystery shelves at our local bookstores.

But there probably should be.

In the late sixties, British novelist Heron Carvic introduced Miss Emily D. Seeton in a delightfully droll book entitled *Picture Miss Seeton*. In it our guilelessly intrepid heroine interrupts a fatal stabbing, an incident she has misinterpreted as a man forcing his attentions on a young woman. The police—and especially Superintendent Delphick (inevitably dubbed "The Oracle" by his subordinates)—latch on to this spinster art teacher as their only

eyewitness. Shocked by the scandal (her name is actually appearing in the London press, which has dubbed her "The Bat-tling Brolly"), Miss Seeton continues on her journey to the small village of Plummergen. A godmother, recently deceased, has left Miss Seeton her cottage in that tiny town. Although she's concerned about having enough money to make ends meet, Miss Seeton is greatly attracted to the idea of early retirement and a peaceful ending of her days in Plummergen.

Which couldn't be much further from what happens. And which is about how Miss Seeton always perceives situations.

The gang of murderous thugs follows Miss Seeton to Plum-

mergen, of course. By all rights she should be a sitting duck there; she refuses to listen to The Oracle's warnings that she may be in danger. Furthermore, there are some very unfriendly natives in Plummergen, local ladies especially who don't take kindly to a stranger, particularly one who has descended on their little town in the wake of so much press.

But Miss Seeton has talents invisible to the naked eye, a kind of protective camouflage that even she can't truly explain. For one thing, she may lack shrewdness but she isn't totally bereft of common sense. For another, there's her uncanny ability to draw the—shall we say soul, for want of a better word?—of her subjects. As a former drawing teacher, Miss Seeton has been trained to sketch; but she herself would be the first to admit that her work is studied, artless, and generally uninspiring. As Delphick quickly discovers, however, when Miss Seeton is *not* trying—when she's absent-mindedly doodling—the results are caricatures showing keen insights into the subject's hidden life. The Oracle believes Miss Seeton is psychic; better yet, she's *his* psychic, for he discovered her.

Miss Seeton also has her umbrella, the item of apparel she is never without and the very

instrument that earned her the title, "The Battling Brolly." Miss Seeton's umbrella is large and unwieldy; she often manages to flatten an accoster with it—usually unwittingly, though. At the conclusion of *Picture Miss Seeton*, The Oracle presents Miss Seeton with a gold-handled umbrella, seeing it rightly as her weapon of choice.

Comparisons to Miss Marple are inevitable. When *Picture* was published in hardcover in the U.S., Ogden Nash was quoted on the dust jacket: "The warmest of welcomes to Heron Carvic. Miss Seeton is the most delightfully satisfactory character since Miss Marple." I won't argue with that, but that is one of the few accurate comparisons that can be made between Miss Seeton and Agatha Christie's spinster sleuth. Jane Marple had a firm grasp of who she was and exactly what she was doing. Emily Seeton is usually at sea, frequently mildly troubled by rather obvious behavior (usually villainy, which isn't in her lexicon), usually extricating herself from very precarious situations by serendipity. She is one of life's innocents, blithely bumbling in and out of danger, following her own agenda: to help the nice policemen out of duty, and for the modest drawing fees they offer; to avoid gossip and scandal, and think the best of everyone; to live quietly

as a maiden lady should.

This from a woman whom The Oracle perceives as a "catalyst of crime," a woman whose very presence stirs up the bottom, so that the criminals float to the top for easy catching. To be fair to The Oracle, he is quite fond of Emily Seeton, and worries a great deal about her safety. It's just that he knows a good thing when he sees it.

Picture Miss Seeton was followed by four more adventures, each with the same trademarks of hilarity, satire, and glorious

stuff and nonsense: *Miss Seeton Draws the Line*, *Witch Miss Seeton*, *Miss Seeton Sings*, and *Odds on Miss Seeton*. It's a pity they didn't start at the beginning when it came time to reprint these gems, but we should not look a gift horse in the mouth. *Witch Miss Seeton* is now out (Berkley, \$2.95, 181 pp.) with a grand painting of Emily on the cover, and they've already announced publication of the others this year.

I think Miss Seeton is looking swell.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Last year's *Murder at the War* by Mary Monica Pulver introduced two likable characters, the recently married Kori and policeman Peter Brichter. The story leading up to their union is chronicled in Pulver's latest, **The Unforgiving Minutes**. The place is the small town of Charter, Illinois. The lovely young Kori, orphaned at the age of six by a double murder, has for the past fourteen years lived under the guardianship of her uncle at beautiful Tretower Ranch, where she breeds Arabian horses. Enter Sergeant Brichter on a case: a tipster has fingered the girl's uncle as a drug kingpin. Brichter, friends with a man who is Kori's resident tutor, uses the contact to gain entrance to the secluded ranch. What he hasn't anticipated is how entranced he will become with Kori—and how deadly that attraction may prove to be for both of them. Fresh characters, innocent romance, and lots of atmosphere add to the tale of the Brichters' pre-wedding days. (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 301 pp.)

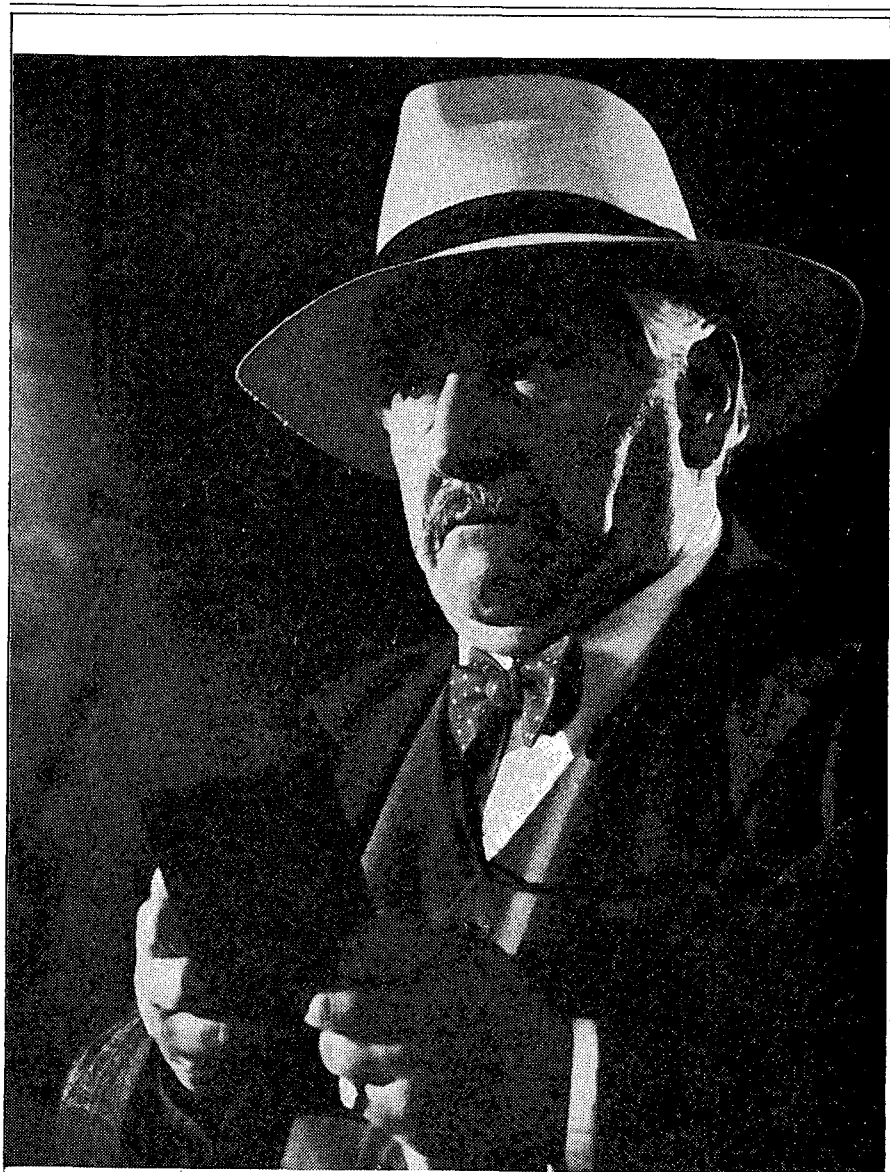
William Campbell Gault's latest, **Cat and Mouse** (St. Martin's Press, \$12.95, 168 pp.), reprises Brock (the Rock) Callahan. Brock has hung up his trenchcoat in L.A. for life with his wife Jan in a California retirement community called San Valdesto. Someone, though, has other ideas for Brock. First, a dead cat comes with a threatening message; then a young P.I. who was once apprenticed to Brock is arrested in a murder frame. The violence is bound to

escalate, and Brock hasn't a clue as to who's got the grudge. This is a fast read with a small but likable cast, and should enormously please Callahan fans. (The paperback editions of Brock the Rock mysteries are becoming available from Berkley, too.)

A first novel receiving a lot of attention—and quite deservedly so—is Elizabeth George's **A Great Deliverance** (Bantam, \$16.95, 307 pp.). Set against a backdrop of isolated Yorkshire, England, the novel opens with the decapitated corpse of a farmer. His plain and reclusive daughter who lived with him confesses to the deed, and then refuses to speak another word. The local investigating officers are feuding, so Scotland Yard is called in. Assigned to the case are the department's fairhaired boy and a bright but definitely troublesome female detective sergeant. There's a serial killer loose in London, and the legend of a dead baby in the ruins—but is it only a legend? Both Lynley and Havers, the Scotland Yard team, are grappling with staggering personal problems, secrets of their own. Before the case is over, they will be forced to face some shocking truths about their own lives as well as those of the victim and his neighbors. In the vein of P.D. James, *A Great Deliverance* works beautifully on many levels: as a first-rate murder investigation, as a penetrating look into the lives of criminals, victims, and investigators, and beyond—into their very hearts. This is a big book, long and rich in characterization; as the people change, so does our perception of their landscape. By the novel's conclusion the effect is cathartic.

Death Locked In, edited by Douglas G. Greene and Robert C. S. Adey, is a wonderful collection of locked-room mysteries and other similar puzzles. Short stories by old friends and new, this volume brims with ingenuity. (International Polygonics, \$12.95, 552 pp.) A jumbo treasure for puzzle lovers of all ages!

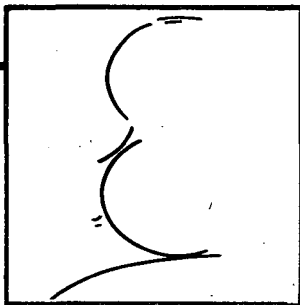
Another series gets a new lease on life with the Ballantine reprint of **Curiosity Didn't Kill the Cat** by M.K. Wren (\$3.50, 261 pp.). Published originally in 1973, this was one of six mysteries featuring Conan Flagg, retired government operative and present bookstore owner in a small oceanside town in Oregon. This novel is written with a sure hand, is peopled with sympathetic and thoroughly credible characters, and is laden with atmosphere. The opening shot—a corpse found on a beach, a man terrified of the tides—leads to lots of action scenes and hinges on some Cold War elements. I look forward to curling up with M.K. Wren's other Conan Flagg adventures, for Flagg is a very appealing guy.



Peter Ustinov as Hercule Poirot in *Appointment with Death*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



If ever there was a sure thing in the movie business, the idea of making one of Agatha Christie's popular Hercule Poirot mysteries, **Appointment with Death**, would seem to be it. Start with Anthony Shaffer (the author of *Sleuth*) to write the screenplay, and add Britisher Michael Winner (who did the Robert Mitchum remake of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*) to direct it. Next contract with Peter Ustinov to reprise his successful portrayals of Poirot in *Death on the Nile* and *Evil Under the Sun*.

Now add some more really big name actors for the character parts: Sir John Gielgud as a genial British major in 1930's Jerusalem; Piper Laurie as the domineering, wealthy widow who makes her financially dependent grown children's lives miserable; Lauren Bacall as an imperious member of Parlia-

ment on vacation; Carrie Fisher and Hayley Mills as additional suspects. Shoot the big scenes on location in the Holy Land. Such a project adds up to money in the bank, right? Well, not quite.

When Agatha Christie herself adapted *Appointment with Death* for the stage, she simplified the plot and cut down on the number of characters, eliminating Hercule Poirot altogether. But Shaffer and his fellow screenwriters have actually added to the plot. In both novel and play, Christie buried the mystery of who eventually killed the widow within the mystery of how she was able almost totally to dominate her children and stepchild. But the movie simply renders her as obnoxious and controlling, the children as weak and too lazy to go out and get jobs.

Finally, in the novel Christie

makes the appeal of Poirot's method very clear: he questions everyone at length because, even though they may lie, "always in the end they tell you what you want to know." In the movie this formula is reversed. "People like to talk," Ustinov is made to say, "and in talking they tell the truth. Why? Because it puts less strain on the memory." Not only is this the opposite of Christie's assumption that people lie rather than tell the truth, it is also contradicted by the movie itself, in which they do lie. Just as in the book, Poirot is able to solve the mystery by concentrating on the lies.

But how does he put them together? At first it seems as though the lies of all five children indicate that they schemed together to kill their mother. But they tell the wrong kinds of lies for that theory to be supported. It begins to look as if the unpleasant old tyrant simply succumbed to heart disease after all.

To the extent that *Appointment with Death* sticks close to Poirot's interrogations and reasoning, which it actually does to a considerable extent, it cannot help but be as interesting as the Agatha Christie origi-

nal. It's in the variations like assembling all the suspects and then, unlike the book, *not* having Poirot reveal the culprit that it goes astray. Some mystery formulas can never be tampered with, and picking out the murderer from among the gathered suspects is one of them.

And then there is the problem of getting aging movie stars to let the story tell itself. Famous actors like to be vivid and to have big scenes, whereas the key to *Appointment with Death* lies in the subtle psychology of what keeps the widow's children subservient and the question of what it would take to motivate one individual among a collection of mild people to commit murder.

Ustinov is fine as Poirot. But Piper Laurie as the widow always seems to be talking to someone on the other side of the room, and Lauren Bacall makes the character she plays so unpleasant that you wish she would disappear from the screen as much as the characters in the movie keep wishing she would leave them alone. In the end the marvelous Christie plot makes *Appointment with Death* work as a movie—little thanks to the distinguished team that has brought it to the screen.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photo-Elizabeth of Bryan, Texas. Hon-Barclay of Toronto, Ontario, town, Massachusetts; Debra K. John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Franklin, Pennsylvania; and California.



graph contest was won by Anne-orable mentions go to Mary Canada; Anne Race of Charles-Robic of Belmont, California; Florida; Peter M. Winkler of Martin Limon of San Francisco,

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STOLEN STATUARY by Anne-Elizabeth

Nick paused in front of the door of Ozzie's Emporium.

"Got to stop in here and offer my sympathy to Ozzie," he said to his wife.

"Hold on, Nick. Look up there. Two of them statues is missing. The ones on the ends."

Nick didn't bother to look up. He already knew they were gone. He'd heard the whole sad story from the barbershop quartet when he got his hair cut this morning.

"Michael Angelo was the one who stole them two statues, Sophie. Late last night he done it. Trucked 'em clear back to Florence, he did."

"What would he go and do a thing like that for?"

"Said he needed 'em for replacement pieces at his Marble Body Parts Shop. Leastwise that's what his brother told the police."

Sophie snorted. "Shucks. From the way you was talking I thought maybe one of Ozzie's relatives died."

"Worse than that. They was valuable, being made of some rare kind of marble. And that's the sad part. Ozzie thought they was nothing but hunks of granite, so he never took out no insurance on them."

"Just goes to show you. Never take a statue for granite," Sophie said.

"Right. If you do, you'll lose your marbles."

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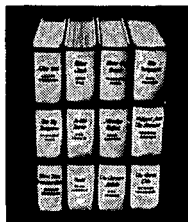
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